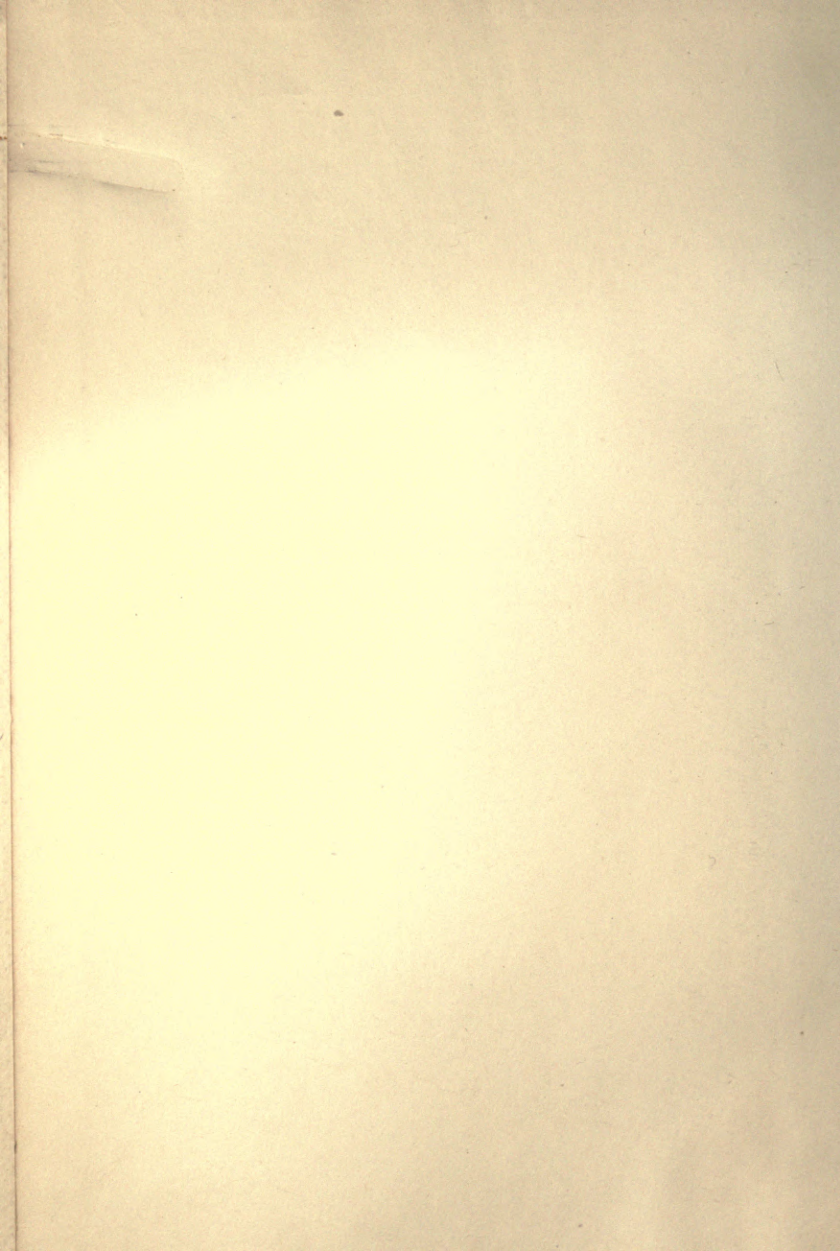




With a picture of
a young woman

Merry Vemas.
John Hanklyn



THE ADVENTURE OF
PRINCESS SYLVIA





The Adventure of Princess Sylvia

BY
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"SET IN SILVER," ETC.



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MY AMERICAN PRINCESS
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THE ADVENTURE OF PRINCESS SYLVIA

CHAPTER I

THE ADVENTURE BEGINS

"Who is Sylvia? What is she,
That all our swains comend her?"

"I'M dashed if I do!" said the Princess.

"My dear—if anyone should hear you!" groaned the Grand Duchess. "He is a most estimable young man, I am sure, and a very suitable match."

"Call him a match, if you like; he's certainly a stick. Anyway, he's not a match for me. There's only one existing." And the Princess's eyes were lifted to the heavens, as if the being at whom she hinted were placed high as the sun that shone above her.

The Grand Duchess was not herself "Hereditary."

Her dear lord and master had been that, which was perhaps the reason why such stateliness as she had was almost all acquired. She dropped it sometimes, when alone with her unmarried, unmanageable young daughter; and to-day (in the sweet old-fashioned garden of the house at Richmond, lent by Queen Victoria) was one of these occasions. The Grand Duchess pouted, and looked like a plump, sulky, elderly child, as she inquired what the Princess Sylvia expected in the way of a matrimonial prize.

"What do I expect?" echoed the young lady. "I expect an Emperor. In fact, *the* Emperor."

For a few moments the Grand Duchess of Eltzburg-Neuwald remained dumb. Then she inadequately murmured, "Dear me!" Yet her demeanour did not suggest a stricken mind. She merely looked surprised, with an added expression that might signify a slow mental readjustment.

"It is really not entirely impossible," she commented at last. "But—the Emperor of Rhaetia is a very great man."

"He is the only man," returned the Princess calmly. "He always has been. He is, and ever will be. He is the Napoleon of his generation, without Napoleon's meanness or brutality. Although he's not an Englishman, even you admit his virtues."

"Don't speak as if I were bristling with English prejudices," scolded the Grand Duchess. "I ceased to be English when I married your father. But why

did you never mention this—er—desire of yours before?”

“I am far too maidenly,” responded Sylvia, “to give my feeling any such bold name. I have not ceased to be English, if my mother has. Indeed, I give my feeling no name at all. I haven’t spoken of it—if there be an ‘it’ to speak of—before, simply because really I’m not crying for a particular toy to play with. I’m only saying, if I can’t have *that*, I won’t have another toy—a poor, unworthy toy.”

“You call Prince Henri d’Ortens a ‘poor, unworthy toy’?”

“Compared with the Emperor of Rhaetia and compared with me. Look at me, mother. Would I not make an Empress?”

Sylvia laughed, sprang up from the seat that girdled the great trunk of the Lebanon cedar, and stood with her bright head erect, her lips still smiling.

The August sun streamed down upon the girl and bathed her in its glory. Her hair was a network of spun gold, under its radiance; her dark eyes jewels; her skin roses and snow; her simple white muslin gown a dazzling robe fit for a fairy, rather than an earthly, princess.

Yes, she would make an Empress, or she would make a goddess. So a man must have thought, even if he had not dared to love her. And so thought her mother.

"The dear Queen has never really favoured poor Henri," murmured the Grand Duchess, a light of introspection in her eyes. Already the French Prince, with pretensions to the incomparable hand of Sylvia, was "*poor Henri*." "I mean, she has never favoured him as a match for you, though she intimated to me yesterday that she saw no insurmountable objections—if you cared for each other"—

"But we don't. At least I don't. Which is all that signifies."

"Pray do not be so flippant. As for Maximilian of Rhaetia, it is perhaps natural that he has never been thought of in connection with you, my dear. He is, no doubt, the most sought-after *parti* in—well, yes, I may say in the world. Not a girl with Royal blood in her veins but would go on her knees to him"—

"I would not," cried Sylvia. "I might worship him, but he should go on his knees to *me*."

"I doubt if those knees will ever bend to man or woman," said the Grand Duchess. "That, however, is a mere matter of speech. I am serious now, and I wish you to be. Though you are a very beautiful girl, my child—there is no disguising that fact from you, as it has been dinned into your ears since you were old enough to understand—and there is no better blood in Europe than runs in your veins; still, our circumstances are—er—unfortunately such that

—that we are, for the present, slightly handicapped.”

“We’re beggars,” said Sylvia. “But—Cophetua married a beggar maid”; and she smiled.

“Pray don’t liken yourself to any such persons, my dear,” objected the Grand Duchess, who, on principle, had so often objected to Sylvia’s unconventionalities that the attitude of objection had become chronic. “Your father is dead. The Grand Duchy of Eltzburg-Neuwald has been absorbed by Prussia—for a price, it is true; but it is your brother who has had most of the benefit of that price. And though my dear husband was second cousin to the Emperor of Germany, who loved him during his life as an elder brother, and though you are strictly *within* the pale from which Maximilian is entitled to select a wife, one must admit that there are other girls who, from a worldly point of view, might be considered more suitable.”

“I wasn’t thinking of the worldly point of view,” said the incorrigible one, with unusual softness. She could be gentle and tender enough in certain moods; but she was used to taking the lead with her mother.

“People—men or women—with Royal blood in their veins *must* think of that point of view,” returned the Grand Duchess. She was not Royal, save by marriage, though her long since dead father, the English Duke of Northminster, claimed ancestry from kings and had married a near relation of Queen

Victoria. But he had been one of the richest men in the world at the time of his daughter's marriage; and the exchequer of Eltzburg-Neuwald had sadly needed replenishing. It, or rather its representative, had finally swallowed a large part of the Duke of Northminster's private fortune, the enormous remainder having vanished in a great financial panic; so that just before the Hereditary Grand Duke of Eltzburg-Neuwald had been gathered to his fathers, he had been induced to make terms with his cousin, the then reigning German Emperor, for the Grand Duchy. Thus deprived of his inheritance, the only son, Friedrich, had joyfully accepted an offer of adoption as Crown Prince from the childless old King of Abruzzia.

The widowed Grand Duchess, not loving the thought of a German residence, when bereft of her ancient importance; hating her son's adopted land of Abruzzia, which she considered "half savage" (yet liking still less the alternative of a wandering life on the Continent, or a home with the uncle who had inherited her father's title and estates), had gratefully caught at Queen Victoria's kindness. Ever since Sylvia Victoria Alexandra Mary Valérie Hildegarde, her daughter, had been a proud little Princess of ten years old, the two had lived in the ancient, rose-and-ivy-embowered house placed at their disposal by Her Gracious Majesty. Sylvia had been educated in England; all her thoughts and ideas

were those of an English girl, and a somewhat "advanced" English girl. Her very beauty was more English than German—the delicately chiselled nose, the short, haughty upper lip, the frank imperiousness of the hazel eyes under the black sweep of lashes, and dark, soft curve of brow. She was twenty-one now, and vastly tired of being Royal, for already her high place in the world had brought her more of inconvenience than privilege.

"I don't wish the Emperor of Rhaetia to want me because I am suitable, but because I am—irresistible," she asseverated. "I want love—love—or I won't marry at all."

"But that is nonsense," gravely pronounced the elder, steeped for long years in all the traditions and conventionalities of Royalty. "Women in our position must be satisfied with the hope that love may come after marriage; or, if not, we must rest content in doing our duty in that state of life to which Heaven has been pleased to call us."

"Bother duty!" remarked Sylvia, with an impatient disregard for those elegancies of speech to which she had been so carefully brought up. "Thank goodness, nowadays not all the king's horses and all the king's men can make even a princess marry anyone against her will. I hate the everlasting cant about duty in marriage. When people love each other they are kind and good and sweet and virtuous, because it is a pleasure, not because it's

duty; and that's the only sort of loyalty worth having between man and woman, according to my ideas. I would not take anything less from a man; and I should despise him if he were ready to accept less from me."

"You are most impious, Sylvia; you ought to have been born a *bourg oise*," said her mother. But at this moment, when the clash of tongues, as opinion stuck upon opinion, was imminent, there occurred a happy diversion in the arrival of a servant with letters.

Sylvia, who was a neglectful correspondent, had nothing; but two or three bulky envelopes had come for the Grand Duchess, and eagerly she broke the seal of one which bore the handwriting of her son Friedrich, now Crown Prince of Abruzzia.

"Open the others for me, dear, while I see what Fritz has to say," she requested. And Sylvia leisurely obeyed.

There was a note from an old friend of whom she was fond; and she had just begun to be interested in the first paragraph, when an ejaculation from her mother caused a quick lifting of her lashes.

The Grand Duchess was staring at the scrawled pages, held close to her near-sighted eyes, while a bright flush troubled the surface of her usually serene countenance.

"What is the matter?" exclaimed Sylvia, "Anything wrong with Fritz?"

"No—no—nothing in the least wrong," murmured the Grand Duchess absent-mindedly. "Far from it, indeed; but really—this is the most *extraordinary* coincidence. It seems almost too strange that it should come at such a moment. Yet I suppose I am not dreaming?" She peered questioningly at Sylvia; for it must be confessed that the Grand Duchess did sometimes sleep, perchance even dream, in the warm seclusion of the old riverside garden.

"Life is a dream!" hummed the Princess. "But you *look* awake, dear; and I've never known you to talk whole sentences in your sleep. What has Fritz been doing?"

"It is not Fritz; it's your Emperor," returned her mother.

It was now Sylvia's turn to flush. This, then, was the "coincidence"! She wished, yet vaguely dreaded, to ask for the purport of the news. Of course it was ridiculous to blush, because it was ridiculous to care. But the fact remained that she did blush and that she did care.

Princess Sylvia had never seen Maximilian of Rhaetia; nevertheless, as she had half laughingly, half earnestly declared, he had been for her the one real man in a world of shadow men, since childish days. In the little room grandiloquently called her "study" (a room sacred to herself alone, whose secrets even her mother did not share) were preserved many souvenirs of the Emperor, which had been ac-

cumulating for years. There were paragraphs cut from newspapers, setting forth his great prowess as a soldier, hunter, and mountaineer, with dramatic anecdotes of his haughty courage when in danger. There were portraits of Maximilian, beginning from an early age, up to the present, when he was shown as a tall, stern-eyed, passionate-lipped, aggressive-chinned young man of thirty. There were copies of pictures he had painted, plays he had written, music he had composed, fierce and warlike speeches he had delivered; accounts of improvements in guns and gunpowder invented by him; with numerous other records of his accomplishments and achievements; for the Emperor of Rhaetia was, in his own mind, and that of his people, the one shining exception to the rule that a "Jack of all trades can be master of none." He was master of all, or at least all he had ever attempted—their name being legion—and Sylvia loved him because it was so. The locked drawers of her desk were hallowed by the records of her hero which they hid.

Now, the thought that flashed into her mind was that Fritz's letter might perhaps contain a gossiping account of the Emperor's engagement to one of those other Royal girls, who, as the Grand Duchess had justly observed, were more suitable to match him than poor, pretty little Princess Sylvia of Eltzburg-Neuwald. Maximilian was thirty years old (Sylvia knew his age to the day, almost to the hour); there-

fore it was remarkable that he had not long ago listened to the advice of his Chancellor and chosen a wife worthy to be Empress of Rhaetia and the mother of an heir.

"Guess what Fritz writes of him," said the Grand Duchess, controlling visible emotion.

Sylvia also controlled hers, crushing it down with a relentless hand, and telling herself that what she felt was at its worst but wounded vanity.

"He's going to be married?" she quietly suggested.

"That depends." Her mother laughed nervously, with a stifled and mysterious delight. "Guess again—but no, I won't tease you. After this letter, coming as it has in the midst of our conversation, I shall be a firm believer in *telepathy*. It is too wonderful. He may be going to be married; he may not. For, my dear, *dear* child, he—wants to marry *you*."

Sylvia sprang to her feet. Perhaps such exhibition of feeling on the part of a Royal maiden decorously sued (by proxy) for her hand, was hardly correct. But Sylvia thought of no such considerations. She did not even know that she had left her chair. For a moment a delicate blue haze floated between her eyes and the Grand Duchess's pleased, plump face.

"He—wants—to—marry—me?" she echoed dazedly.

"Yes, you, my darling. Providence must have

drawn your inclination toward him. It is really a romance. Some day, no doubt, it will be told to the world in history.”

Sylvia did not hear. She stood quite still, her hands clasped before her, the letter she had been reading on the grass at her feet.

“Did he—the Emperor—tell this to Fritz and ask him to write to you?” she questioned.

“Not—not exactly that, dear,” admitted the Grand Duchess, her face changing; for Sylvia was so exacting and held such peculiar ideas, that it was sometimes rather difficult to know how she would receive the most ordinary announcements.

The rapt expression faded from Sylvia’s features, like the passing of dawn.

“Not—exactly that?” she repeated. “Then what—how?”

“Perhaps—though it is not strictly the correct thing—you had better read Fritz’s letter?”

Sylvia put her hands behind her back with a child-like gesture. “I—somehow I don’t want to. Please tell me,” she said simply.

“Well, then, you know what an admiration Fritz has felt for Count von Markstein, the Rhaetian Chancellor, ever since the visit the Chancellor paid to Abruzzia? They have kept up a correspondence from time to time, and the sort of friendship which often exists between an old man with a great career behind him and a young man with his still to come.

Now it seems (in the *quite* informal manner by which such affairs are generally begun) that Count von Markstein has written confidentially to Fritz, as our only near male relative, to ask how he would regard an alliance between you and Maximilian, or if we have already disposed of your hand. The Emperor is inclined to listen to advice at last; and you, as a Protestant Princess"—

"Yes, a Protestant Princess more than ever, for I protest against being approached upon such terms!" Sylvia exclaimed.

The countenance of the Grand Duchess became overcast. There were certain drawbacks in having a spoiled beauty for a daughter. "Sylvia," she ejaculated, "surely you don't mean—surely you are not going to throw over such a marvelous chance as this—a chance that a queen's daughter might gladly accept—because of a sentimental, schoolgirl scruple?"

"Why do you suppose the Emperor—or his Chancellor—thinks of anyone so insignificant for such a high place, when there are others far more eligible?" asked Sylvia, with reflective dryness, answering one question by another.

"Fritz goes on to mention various good reasons in his letter, if you would only let me tell you, and would take them sensibly," said the much-enduring elder woman.

"I should like to hear them, at all events," Sylvia judiciously replied.

"Well, as I was beginning to explain, the Empress of Rhaetia must be a Protestant. At present, as Fritz says, there are not many eligible young Protestant Princesses who would be acceptable to the Rhaetian people and add to the Emperor's popularity. Then, as you know, Maximilian is a man who dominates those around him; he wishes to marry a young girl who, though of Royal birth, could not by any possibility have been heiress to a throne of her own. I fancy he would choose to mould his wife and to take a girl without too many important or importunate relatives; for he is not one who would dream of adding to his own greatness by that of a wife. Besides, Maximilian is partial to England, and the fact that you have had an English education would be favourably rather than unfavourably regarded both by him and Count von Markstein—at least, so Fritz believes. And though I have never allowed you, since you were a child, to have your photograph taken, and you have lived in such seclusion that you have been little seen, still the rumour has somehow reached Maximilian's ears that you are—not ugly. He has been heard more than once to remark that whatever the future Empress of Rhaetia might be, she would not be a plain woman; therefore, altogether"—

"Therefore, altogether, my references appear to

be satisfactory, and at a pinch I might do for the place," broke in Sylvia, with hot impatience. "Oh, mother, I will marry Maximilian, or I will marry no man; but I won't be married to him in Count von Markstein's hateful cut-and-dried way."

"It's the Emperor's way, as well as Markstein's."

"Then for once in his big, grand, obstinate life, he shall learn that there are other wills than his in the world; and that there is one woman who won't play Griselda even for the sake of being his Empress."

The Grand Duchess looked worried (as well she might, had she been blessed or banned with a prophetic soul to whisper of the future). "You look so odd when you say that," she observed; "as if you had—some kind of plan."

"And so I have," confessed Sylvia. "It came to me suddenly—as all inspirations come. It's in embryo yet; but I shall fill in the details." She came close to her mother, and knelt down on the grass at her feet, looking up with a light in her eyes that no man, and few women, could have resisted.

There was nobody save the Grand Duchess and the late roses to see how a young Princess threw her mantle of dignity to the winds; for the two ladies did not keep Royal state and a Royal retinue in the quaint old house at Richmond; and the harbour hid their confidence from intrusive eyes or ears.

"You do love me, don't you, dear?" cooed Sylvia, softly as a dove.

"You know I do, my daughter, though I don't pretend to understand you."

"People grow dull when we understand them too well. It's like solving a puzzle; there's no more fun in it when it's finished. But you *do* wish me to be happy?"

"More than anything else—except, of course, Fritz"—

"Fritz is a man and can take care of himself. *I* must only do the best I can. And there's something I want *so* much, and it would give me a heaven on earth, all my own, if I could win it. Maximilian's love, quite for myself, as a *girl*, not a proper, 'Protestant Princess.' I think I see how I *can* win it, too, if you will only help me."

"I'll do my best," cried the Grand Duchess, carried out of herself into unwonted impulsiveness by kisses soft and sweet as falling rose-leaves. "Only I don't see what I *can* do."

"But *I* see; and you must promise to see with my eyes."

"They are very bright ones!" laughed her mother.

Princess Sylvia put both arms round the plump waist, and gave the Grand Duchess a hug. Then she laughed—an odd, musical, half-frightened laugh.

“Mother, something wonderful is going to happen to you and me,” she exclaimed. “We’re going to have an adventure.”

CHAPTER II

THE INADVERTENCE OF FRAU JOHANN

TWILIGHT fell late in the tiny Rhaetian village of Heiligengelt. So high on the mountain-side were set the few brown châlets, the simple inn, and the church with its Oriental spire, that they caught the last red rays of sunlight, to hold them flashing on burnished copper tiles and small bright window-panes long after the valley below slept in the shadows of night.

One September evening two carriages toiled up the steep winding road that led to the highest hamlet of the Rhaetian Alps, and a girl walking by the side of the foremost driver (minded, as he was, to save the tired horses) looked up to see Heiligengelt glittering like a necklet of jewels on the brown throat of the mountain. Each window was a separate ruby set in gold; the copper bulb that topped the church steeple was a burning carbuncle; while above the flashing band of gems towered the rocky face of the mountain, its steadfast features carved in stone, its brow capped with snow that caught the

glow of sunset, or lay in blue-white seams along the wrinkles of its forehead.

The driver had assured the young English lady that she might remain in the carriage; her weight would be as nothing to the horses, who were used to carrying far heavier loads than this of to-day up the mountain road to Heiligengelt in the summer season, when many tourists came. But she had insisted on walking, and the brown-faced fellow with the green hat and curly cock-feather liked her the better for her persistence. She was plainly dressed, and not half as grand in her appearance as some of the ladies who went up with him in July and August to visit little Heiligengelt; but, apart from her beauty (which his eye was not slow to see), there was something else that captured both admiration and respect. Perhaps, for one thing, her knowledge of Rhaetian—counted by other countries a difficult language, though bearing to German a cousinship closer than that which Romance bears to Italian—did much to warm the Rhaetian's heart. At all events, without stopping to analyse his feeling, or grope for its cause, the driver of the first carriage found himself bestowing voluble confidences upon the charming foreigner.

He told her of his life: how he had not always lived in the valley and driven horses for a living. Before he took a wife, and had a young family to rear, he had made his home in Heiligengelt, which

was his native village. There his old mother still lived and kept the inn. He was glad that the ladies meant to stop with her for a few days; after the season was over, and the strangers had all been driven away by the cold and early flurries of snow, the poor mother grew weary of idleness and longed for the sight of new faces. There were not many neighbours in Heiligengelt. She would be pleased to see the English ladies, and would do her best to make them comfortable, though it was not often that strangers came so late in the year. The mother would be surprised as well as rejoiced at the sight of the Herrschäft, since it seemed that they had not written in advance. Still, they need not fear that her surprise would interfere with their welfare. Those who knew Frau Johann knew that her floors ever shone like wax, that her cupboard was never empty, that her linen was aired and scented like the new-mown hay. It was but justice to say this, although she was his mother. And besides, she had need always to be in readiness for distinguished guests, because—but the eloquent tongue of Alois Johann was suddenly silenced like the clapper of a bell which the ringer has ceased to pull, and his sunburnt face grew sheepish.

“Because of what?” urged his companion.

Alois shrugged his shoulders and laughed. “I was going to say a thing which I had no business to say,” he confessed. “We men sneer at our women

because they keep no secrets, yet sometimes we find ourselves near to the same foolishness. I must take care, and beg that the noble lady will not embarrass me with questions."

The noble lady obediently held her tongue, yet there was a twinkle under her long, downcast lashes, which might in turn have aroused Alois' curiosity if he had seen.

Slowly they climbed on; the two carriages, with the noble lady's noble mother, the middle-aged companion, the French maid, and the modest supply of luggage, toiling up behind.

At last they reached the inn with the steeply pointed roof of grey shingles and the big picture of Heiligengelt's patron saint portrayed in bright colours on the white house-wall. A characteristic call from Alois, sent forth before the highest plateau was reached, brought an apple-cheeked old dame to the front door; and it was the youngest of the travellers who asked, with a pleasant greeting, for the best suite of rooms that Frau Johann could provide.

The Rhaetian woman and her son exchanged a glance which mirrored mystery. Then Frau Johann regretted that her best rooms were already occupied by four gentlemen who came each year at this season to spend a week or ten days. They had the bedchambers commanding the finest view, and the only private sitting-room in the house; but there were other good rooms in plenty, and one of these could easily

be transformed into a sitting-room, if the ladies desired.

An hour later, when the new-comers, mother, daughter and companion, sat down to a hot supper in a room rendered hastily habitable for dining, the youngest of the three remarked to Frau Johann upon the peaceful stillness of her house.

"One would think that there was not a soul in the place save ourselves," she said. "Yet we are not your only guests, we know."

"The gentlemen who are stopping with me are away all day on the mountains," explained Frau Johann. "It is now the season for chamois-hunting, and it is for that sport and also some good climbing, only to be done by experts, that they come to me. To-night they do not return, but stop at—at a hut they have near the top of the Weisshorn, to begin work in the morning earlier than would be possible if they slept in the village. That, indeed, is their constant custom."

"Then they are rather selfish to keep your only sitting-room, since they can make but little use of it," said the girl. "And so I should like to hint, if I happened to meet them."

"May Heaven forbid!" hastily ejaculated Frau Johann, almost dropping the plate of eggs with minced veal which she was carrying.

"Why not, then?" laughed the young English lady, who was the most beautiful creature the Rhae-

tian woman had looked upon for many a long day. "Are these gentleman-hunters persons of great importance, that they must not be told the truth about themselves by those they have inconvenienced in their thoughtlessness?"

For an instant Frau Johann was dumb, as one who searches for an answer not easily to be found. "The gentlemen are good patrons of mine; therefore they are important to me, gracious Fräulein," she at last replied. "I should not like their feelings to be hurt."

"I was only joking," the girl assured her. "We are satisfied with this room, which you have made so pleasant for us. All I care for is that the *mountains* be not private. I may climb as much as I like—I and my friend, Miss Collinson, who is a darling mountaineer" (with this, she cast a glance at the companion, who visibly started in response, perhaps at the revelation of her skill); "for I suppose that your other guests have not engaged the whole Weissshorn for their own?"

The landlady's smile returned. "No, gracious Fräulein; you are free to wander as you will; but take care that you do not attempt feats of too great difficulty, and take care also that you are not mistaken for a chamois, to be shot."

"Even *our* prowess as climbers will hardly entitle us to such a distinction," replied the youngest of the ladies, who seemed so much more inclined towards general conversation than the others. "But wake us

early to-morrow. We should like to have breakfasted and be out by half-past seven."

"And will you take a guide, gracious Fräulein? I can engage a good one if you wish to try some of the famous climbs."

"Thank you, no," said the girl. "We have our Baedeker, and will only attempt such places as he pronounces safe for amateurs. There's an easy way to the top, we've read, and if to-morrow be fine, we may undertake it. But what an excellent engraving you have over the fireplace, with the chamois' horns above it! Isn't that a portrait of your Emperor?"

Frau Johann's eyes darted to the picture. "*Ach!* I meant to have had it carried away," she muttered.

The girl caught the words. "Why should it be carried away? Don't you love the Emperor, that you would have his face put out of sight?"

"Not love *unser Max*?" The exclamation came quick and indignant. "We worship him, gracious Fräulein; we would die for him any day, and think ourselves blessed with the chance. Oh, I would not let you go back to your own country with the thought that we do not love the best Kaiser a country ever had. As for the portrait, I did not know I spoke aloud; that sometimes happens to me, since I grow deaf and old. But I only wished it put away because it is so poor, it does *unser Max* (that is what he is pleased to have us call him) no justice. You—you would not recognize him from that pic-

ture. The Kaiser is a very different-looking man."

With this, Frau Johann went out to fetch another dish, which was ready in the kitchen; to cool her hot face, and to scold herself for an old *dummkopf*, all the way downstairs.

In the bedchamber which had so recently been turned into a dining-drawing-room, the young lady took advantage of the landlady's temporary absence to indulge in long-stifled laughter.

"Poor, transparent old dear!" she exclaimed. "I'm sure she doesn't dream that one reads her like a book. She is in a sad fright now, lest we should recognise '*unser Max*' from his portrait, and spoil his precious *incognito*."

"Then you think that one of the gentlemen really is"—began the Grand Duchess.

"I am sure that he is," finished Princess Sylvia.

CHAPTER III

THE YOUNG MAN WITH THE BARE KNEES.

"THIS is perfectly *awful!*" groaned the unfortunate lady who passed under the name of Miss Collinson.

"Perfectly *splendid!*" corrected her companion.

The elder lady pressed Baedeker convulsively to her bosom, and sat down. "I shall have to stop here," she gasped, "all the rest of my life, and have my meals and night things sent up to me. I'm very sorry; but I shall never move again."

"Don't be absurd, dear; we're absolutely safe," said Sylvia. "I may be a selfish little wretch, but I wouldn't for worlds have brought you into danger. You've come so far; surely you can come a little farther? *Baedeker* says you can. In ten minutes you'll be at the top."

"You might as well say I'll be in my grave; it amounts to much the same thing," retorted Miss Collinson, who was really Miss Jane M'Pherson, and had been Sylvia's governess. "I can't look down; I can't look up, because I keep thinking of what's be-

hind me. After I get my breath and get used to things, I may be comparatively comfortable *here*; but as to stirring, there's no use thinking of it."

"You'd make an ideal hermitess," said Sylvia. "You've the very features for that profession; austere, yet benevolent. But you're not *really* afraid now?"

"Not sitting down," admitted Miss M'Pherson, gradually regaining her accustomed calm.

"Do you think you'd be afraid, and lose your head or anything, if I just strolled on to the top for the view, and came back to you in about half an hour?"

"No—o," said the governess. "I may as well accustom myself to loneliness, since I am obliged to spend my remaining years on this spot. But I'm not at all sure that the Grand Duchess would approve"—

"You mean Lady de Courcy. She wouldn't mind. She knows I have a steady head, and—physically—a good heart. Besides, I shall have only myself to look after; and one doesn't need a chaperon for a morning call on a mountain view."

"I'm not so certain about *this* mountain view!"

"You're very subtle. But I *really* haven't come out to look for him this morning. There's plenty of time for that by and by."

"Dear Princess, don't speak as if you could possibly do such a thing at *any* time."

"Miss de Courcy, please! Why do you suppose we are all in *das Land im Gebirge*, if not to pursue a certain imperial eagle to his eyrie, where he masquerades as a common bird?"

"Ah, my dear, don't demean yourself, even to me, who know you so well. You are here not to *pursue*, but to give an Emperor who wants a Princess for his consort a chance to fall in love with herself."

"If he will! But what do Mary de Courcy and Jane Collinson know about the affairs of emperors and princesses? *Au revoir*, dear friend. Presently, if you find courage to look, you will see me waving a handkerchief-flag at the top."

Sylvia took up her alpenstock and pushed on. There was a route to the highest peak of the Weiss-horn only to be attacked by experienced climbers; but the path along which she and Miss M'Pherson had set out from Heiligengelt four hours ago was merely tedious, never dangerous. Sylvia knew that her governess was safe and not half as much frightened by the unaccustomed height as she pretended.

They had started at half-past seven, just as a September sun was beginning to draw the night chill out of the keen mountain air; and it was now nearly twelve. Sylvia was hungry.

In Wandeck, the second largest town of Rhaetia, she had bought rucksacks for herself and Miss M'Pherson; and to-day these acquisitions were being tested for the first time. Each bag stored an

abundant luncheon for its bearer; while on top, secured by straps passed across the shoulders, reposed a wrap to be used in rain or rest after violent exercise. Sylvia's rucksack grew heavy as she ascended, though at first its weight had seemed insignificant; and spying at a distance a green plateau on the mountain-side, it occurred to her that it might be well to lighten the load and satisfy her appetite at the same time.

"That good M'Pherson is quite happy with Baedeker, and won't be vexed if I am gone a little longer than I said," she assured herself. There was no gracious plateau at the top of the Weisshorn; only a sterile heap of rocks on which to stand for self-gratulation or incidentally to admire the view; and there was, beside, enough difficulty in reaching this lower point of vantage to make the venture attractive. The path zigzagged up, a mere scratch on the face of the mountain; but the plateau, like a terrace laid out upon a buttress, could be gained only by scrambling over rough rocks and climbing in good earnest here and there. Beyond the visible strip of green, the natural terrace stretched away into mystery round the corner, like the end of a picture in perspective.

Sylvia calculated the effort and decided that she was equal to it; but before she had gone half-way, she would gladly have stood once more on the path worn by the feet of less ambitious travellers. She

even felt a certain sympathy with the sentiments Miss M'Pherson had expressed; yet there was nothing to do but go on. It would be worse to turn than to proceed. Her cheeks began to burn, and her heart to tap a warning against her side. How huge a giant was this mountain—towering above her, falling sheer away beneath her feet, down there where she did not care to look—how pitifully insignificant she.

But there was the plateau, bathed in sunshine like the Promised Land. And to her ears was wafted therefrom the sound of a man's voice, cheerily, melodiously jödeling.

"What if it should be he?" thought Sylvia. She had come all the way from England to meet him, and it was hard that he should jödel while she perished. Much good would it do her if her spirit beheld him bending over her crushed material remains.

Still the voice of the invisible one jödelled on.

"Help!" Sylvia added an impromptu to the chorus. "He may as well save me, be he emperor or tourist. Oh, I hope this isn't a lesson not to climb too high. Ought I to call for help in Rhaetian or English? I'll try both, to make quite sure."

She did try both, with the result that the jödeling suddenly stopped. Instead, an iron-shod boot rang against a rock. Forgetting fear in desire to know whether the actor now to appear for the first time on her life's stage would be hero or super, her foot

slipped from its scanty hold. Stumbling, she slid from the rocky ledge down to the plateau, finally landing on her knees at the feet of a young man who strode hastily round the corner.

"Himmel!" exclaimed a voice, half laughing, half startled. She dared not look up, lest she should meet disappointment. Would it be he, sent to her by Destiny, or some tourist, sent by Cook?

One who knew Maximilian's habits well (the only one, beside her mother, wholly taken into confidence) had told her that to find him as a man, and not an emperor, she should make her pilgrimage to the Heiligengelt in the chamois-hunting season. She had remembered this hint. She had come; was she now about to see?

Two brown hands were held out to help her. Slowly she raised her eyes. They travelled up and up. Beginning with a pair of big nailed boots, they glided over the knitted detail of woollen stockings, and were stopped for an instant at an unexpected obstacle in the shape of bare, muscular brown knees. (Thank goodness, at least Fate had spared her a tourist!) Short shabby trousers; a grey coat, passe-moiled with green, from one pocket of which protruded a great hunch of bread-and-ham, evidently just thrust in; broad shoulders; a throat like a column of bronze; a face—the blood leaped in Sylvia's veins and sang in her ears. It was he—it was he! Here was the eyrie: the eagle was at home.

All her life had but led up to this moment. Under the soft hat of green felt, adorned with the beard of a chamois, was the face she had dreamed of by night and day. A dark, austere face, with more of Mars than Apollo in its lines, but to her worth all the ideals of all the sculptors in the world. He was dressed as a chamois-hunter, and there was nothing in the well-worn costume to distinguish the wearer from the type he represented; but as easily might the eagle to whom she likened him try to pass for a barn-yard fowl as this man for a peasant—so Sylvia thought.

She hoped that he did not feel the beating in her finger-ends as he caught her hands, lifted and set her on her feet. There was humiliation in this tempest of her pulses, knowing that he did not share it. To her, this meeting was an epoch: to him, a trivial incident. She would have keyed his emotion to hers, if she could, but since she had had years of preparation, he a single moment, perhaps she might have rested satisfied with the expression in his eyes.

It said, had she been calm enough to read it: "Is Heaven raining goddesses to-day?"

Now, what was she to say to him? How make the most of this wonderful chance that had come, to know the man and not the Emperor? Each word should be chosen, like a bit of mosaic that fits into a complicated pattern. She should marshal her sentences as a general marshals his battalions, with a

plan of campaign for each one. A spirit-monitor (a match-making montior) seemed to whisper these advices in her ear; yet she was powerless to heed them. Like a schoolgirl about to be examined for a scholarship, knowing that all the future might depend upon a single hour, the need to be resourceful left her dumb. How many times had she not planned her first conversation with Maximilian, the first words she should speak to rivet his attention, to make him feel that she was subtly different from any woman he had ever known? But now, epigrams turned tail and raced away from her like playful colts refusing to be caught.

"I hope you are not hurt?" asked the chamois-hunter, in the *patois* dear to the mountain-folk of Rhaetia.

Here was a comfort; at least she was not to have the responsibility of playing the first card. Meekly she followed his lead.

"Only in the pride that comes before a fall," she answered, in the tongue she had delighted to learn, because it was her hero's. "There should be a sign between the path and this plateau: 'All save suicides should beware.'"

"We have never thought of the necessity, my mates and I," said the man in the grey coat passemoiled with green. "Until you came, *gna' Fräulein*, no tourist has cared to run the risk."

Sylvia's eyes lit suddenly with a sapphire spark.

The spirit of mischief nipped her beating heart between rosy thumb and finger, daring her to a frolic—such a frolic as no girl on earth had ever had. And she would show this grave, austere, self-centred young hero a phase of life he had not seen before. Then, let come what would out of this adventure, at least she should have an Olympian episode to remember.

“Until *I* came?” She caught up the words, standing before him on the spot where he had placed her. “But I am no tourist; I am an explorer.”

He raised level, dark eyebrows; and when he smiled half his austerity was gone. So beautiful a girl need be no more than commonplace of thought and speech; indeed, the hunter of chamois expected little else from women. Yet this one bade fair to have surprises in reserve. He had brought down marvellous game to-day, such as no hunter before him had ever found upon the mountain-side.

“I know the Weisshorn well,” said he, “and love it; but I cannot see how it rewards the explorer; unless you are a climber or a geologist.”

“I am neither; but I came in search of something that I have wanted all my life to see,” replied the girl.

His face confessed curiosity. “Might one ask the name of the rare thing? Perhaps one might help in the search.”

“I feel sure,” replied Sylvia graciously, “that you

could help me, if you would, as well as anyone on earth."

"That is good hearing, lady, though I know not yet how I have deserved the compliment. First I must hear what you seek, and then"—

"I seek a rare plant that grows only in high places. It is said to be found here at certain seasons; though I have never met anyone who can boast of plucking it. I would that I could be the first."

"Is it the Edelweiss, *gna' Fräulein?* Because, if so, I know where to take you."

She shook her head. "The botanical name is very hard to pronounce. But it is sometimes called by common people, *Edelmann*. I should be disappointed to go away without a sight of it—though I was warned it would not be wise to come."

"Those were wise who warned you, lady. I know of no such plant as that you mention. If it were here, I must have seen it. The chance was not worth the danger you have run."

"Oh yes, the chance *was* worth the danger. You—a chamois-hunter—to say that! You must run a thousand risks a day in seeking what you want."

"But I am a man. You are a woman; and women should keep to beaten paths and safety."

"I wonder, is that the theory of all Rhaetians? I know your Emperor holds it."

"Who told you that, *gna' Fräulein?*" He gave

her a sharp look; but her violet eyes were innocent of guile, as the flowers they resembled.

"Oh, many people. We hear much of him in England."

"Good things or bad?"

"The things that he deserves. Now, can you guess which? But I could tell you more if I were not so very, very hungry. I can't help seeing your luncheon, thrust into your pocket, perhaps, when you came to help me. Do you want it all" (she carefully ignored the contents of her rucksack), "or—would you share it?"

The chamois-hunter looked surprised. But then this was his first experience of a feminine explorer, and he quickly rose to the occasion.

"There is more bread and ham where this came from," he replied, with flattering alacrity. "Will you be graciously pleased to accept something of our best?"

"If *you* please, then I shall be much pleased," she responded. Miss M'Pherson was forgotten. Fortunately the deserted lady was supplied with congenial literature, down below.

"I and some friends of mine have a sort of—hut round the corner," announced the chamois-hunter, with a gesture that indicated direction. "No woman has ever been our guest there, but I invite you to come if you will. Or, if you prefer, remain here, and in a few minutes I will bring you such food as

we have. At best it is not much to boast of. We chamois-hunters are poor men, living roughly."

Sylvia smiled, and imprisoned each new thought of mischief like a trapped bird. "I've heard you're rich in hospitality," she said. "Now is my chance to prove the story."

The eyes of the hunter, dark, brilliant, and keen as an eagle's, pierced hers. "You have no fear?" he said. "You are a woman, alone, in a desolate place. For what you know, my mates and I may be a set of brigands."

"Baedeker does not mention the existence of brigands at present in the Rhaetian Alps," retorted Sylvia, with quaint dryness. "I have always found him very trustworthy. I've great faith in the chivalry of Rhaetian men, whose Emperor—though he thinks meanly of women—sets so good an example. But if you knew how hungry I am, you would not keep me waiting for talk of brigands. Bread-and-butter is far more to the point."

"Even search for the *Edelmann* may wait?"

"Yes; the *Edelmann* may wait—on me." (The last two words were added in a whisper.)

"You must pardon my going first," said the young man with the bare knees. "The way here is too narrow for politeness."

"Yet I wish that our peasants at home had such courteous manners as yours," Sylvia patronised him.

"You Rhaetians need not go to Court, I see, for rules of behaviour."

"The mountains teach us something, maybe."

"Something of their greatness, which we should all do well to learn. But have you never lived in a town?"

"A man of my sort *exists* in a town; he *lives* in the mountains." With this diplomatic answer the tall figure swung round a corner formed by a boulder, and Sylvia uttered an exclamation of surprise. The "hut" of which the chamois-hunter had spoken was revealed by the turn, and it was of an original and picturesque description. Instead of the humble erection of stones and wood which she had expected, the rocky side of the mountain had been utilised to afford her sons a shelter.

A doorway, and large square panes for windows, had been made in the red-veined, purplish-brown porphyry; while a heavy slab of oak (now standing ajar), and wooden frames, glittering with jewel-like bottle-glass, protected the rooms within from storm or cold.

Even had the Princess been ignorant of her host's identity she would have been wise enough to know that this was no *Sennhutte*, or common abode of peasants who hunt the chamois for a precarious living. The work of hewing out in the solid rock such a habitation as this must alone have cost more than most chamois-hunters could save in a lifetime; but,

after her first ejaculation she expressed no further amazement, only admiration.

The man stood aside that she might pass into the outer room, and, though she was not invited to further exploration, she could see by the several doors cut in the walls that this was not the sole accommodation which the curious house could boast.

On the stone floor rugs of deer and chamois skin were spread; in a rack of oak, ornamented with splendid antlers and studded with the sharp, pointed horns of the chamois, were suspended guns of modern make and brightly polished knives. The table in the middle of the room had been carved with exceeding skill; and the half-dozen chairs were oddly fashioned of stags' antlers, formed to hold fur-cushioned wooden seats. A carved dresser of black oak held a store of the brightly coloured china made by the peasants in the valley below, eked out with platters and tankards of old pewter; and in the great fireplace a gipsy kettle was suspended over a red bed of fragrant pine-wood embers.

"This is a place fit for a king—or even an emperor," Sylvia said, with demure graciousness, when the bare-kneed young man had offered her a seat and crossed the room to open the closed cupboard under the dresser. He was stooping as she spoke, but at her last words looked quickly round over his shoulder.

"We peasants are not afraid of a little work, when

it is for our own comfort," he responded. "And most of the things you see are home-made during the long winters."

"Then you are all very clever. But, tell me, has the Emperor ever been your guest? I have read—let me see, could it have been in a guide-book, or perhaps in some society paper?—that he comes occasionally to the mountains here."

"Oh, yes; the Kaiser has been at this hut—once, twice, perhaps." Her host laid a loaf of black bread, a cut cheese, and a knuckle of ham on the table. He then glanced at his guest, expecting her to come forward; but she sat still on her throne of antlers, her little feet in their strong mountain boots, daintily crossed under the short tweed skirt.

"I hear your Kaiser is a good chamois-hunter," she leisurely remarked. "But that, perhaps, is only the flattery which makes the atmosphere of kings. No doubt, you could give him many points in chamois-hunting?"

The young man smiled. "The Emperor is not a bad shot," he returned.

"For an amateur. But you are a professional. I wager now that you would not change places with the Emperor?"

How the chamois-hunter laughed and showed his white teeth! There were those, in the towns he scorned, who would have been astonished at his levity.

"Change places with the Emperor? Not—unless I were obliged, *gna' Fräulein*. Not *now*, at all events," with a meaning bow and glance.

"Thank you. You are quiet a courtier. One of the things they say of him in England is that he dislikes women. But perhaps he does not understand them?"

"Indeed, lady? I had not heard that they were so difficult of comprehension."

"Ah, that shows how little you *chamois*-hunters know them. Why, we can't understand ourselves! Though—a very odd thing—we have no difficulty in reading one another, and knowing all each other's faults."

"That would seem to say a man should get a woman to choose a wife for him."

"I'm not so sure. Yet the Emperor, we hear, will let his Chancellor choose his."

"Ah! Were you told this also in England?"

"Yes. For the gossip is that she's an English Princess. Now, what is the good of being an Emperor if he can't even pick out a wife to please himself?"

"I know little about such high matters, *gna' Fräulein*. But I fancied that Royal folk chose wives to please the people rather than themselves. If the lady be of good blood, virtuous, of the right religion, and pleasant to look at, why—those are the principal things, I suppose."

"So should I not suppose, if I were a man—and an Emperor. I should want to fall in love."

"Safer not; he might fall in love with the wrong woman." And the chamois-hunter looked with a certain intentness into his guest's deep eyes.

She flushed under the gaze, and answered at random, "I doubt if he *could* fall in love. A man who would let his Chancellor choose! He can have no heart at all."

"He has perhaps found other things more important in life than women."

"Chamois, for instance. *You* would sympathise there."

"Chamois give good sport. They are hard to find; hard to hit when you have found them."

"So are the best types of women. Those who, like the chamois (and the plant I spoke of), live only in high places. Oh, for the sake of my sex, I hope that one day your Emperor will be forced to change his mind—that a *woman* will make him change it!"

"Perhaps a woman has—already."

Sylvia grew pale. Was she too late? Or was this a hidden compliment which the chamois-hunter did not guess she had the clue to understand? She could not answer. The silence grew electrical, and he broke it with some slight confusion. "It is a pity the Kaiser cannot hear you. He might be converted to your more English views."

"Or he might clap me into prison for *lèse-majesté*."

"He would not do that, *gna' Fräulein*—if he's anything like me."

"Which is just what he is—in appearance, I mean, judging by his pictures."

"You have seen his pictures?"

"Oh, yes—you are really rather like him, only browner and bigger, perhaps. Yet I am glad that you are a chamois-hunter and not an Emperor—as glad as *you* can be."

"Will you tell me why, lady?"

"Oh, for one reason, because I could not ask him to do what I'm going to ask of you. You have laid the bread and ham ready, but you forgot to cut it."

"A thousand pardons. Our conversation has sent my wits wool-gathering. My mind should have been on my manners, instead of such far-off things as emperors." He began hewing at the black loaf as if it were an enemy to be conquered. And there were few in Rhaetia who had ever seen those dark eyes so bright.

"I like ham and bread cut thin, if you please," said Sylvia. "There—that is better. I will sit here, if you will bring the things to me. You are very kind;—and I find that I am tired."

"A draught of our Rhaetian beer will put better heart into you, it may be," suggested the hunter, taking up the plate of bread and meat he had cut,

placing it in her hand, and returning to draw a tankard of foaming amber liquid from a quaint hogshead in a corner.

But Sylvia waved the *krug* away with a smile and a pretty gesture. "My head has proved to be not strong enough for your mountains; I'm sure it isn't strong enough for your beer. Have you some cold water?"

The hunter of chamois laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Our water here is fit only for the outside of the body," he explained. "To us, that is no deprivation, as we are true Rhaetians for our beer. But on your account I am sorry."

"Perhaps you have milk?" asked Sylvia. "I could scarcely count the cows, they were so many, as I came up the mountain."

"There are plenty of cows about," answered the young man dubiously. "But if I fetch one, can you milk it?"

"Pray, good friend, fetch the cow and milk the cow," cried Sylvia. "And here is a trifle to reward all your kindness and trouble."

She would not see the blood rising in a red tide to the brown forehead, but bent her eyes upon her hand, from which she slowly withdrew a ring. It fitted tightly, for it was years since she had had it made, before the little fingers had finished growing. And when she had pulled off the circlet of gold, she held it up alluringly.

"I will do my best to get you the milk," said the hunter, "but we mountain men don't take payment from our guests."

"Here is no *payment*; only something to help you remember the first woman who, as you say, has ever entered this door. Please come at least and look."

The hunter drew near and took the proffered ornament. "The crest of Rhaetia!" he exclaimed, as his eyes fell upon a shield of black and green enamel, set with tiny, sparkling brilliants.

"Press a spring on the left side," directed the giver, a faint tremor in her voice; "and when you have seen the secret it will show, you may guess why I spoke at first of the ring as a reward, and why you can't loyally refuse to accept it."

The brown forefinger found a pin's point prominence of gold, and pressing, the shield flew up to reveal a miniature of Emperor Maximilian.

"You are surprised?" said Sylvia.

"I am surprised, because I understood that you thought poorly of our Kaiser."

"*Poorly?* What gave you that impression?"

"Why, you scorned his opinion of women."

"Who am I to scorn an Emperor's opinion, even on a matter he would consider so unimportant? I confess we English girls are interested in your Maximilian, if only because we would be charitably minded and teach him better. But as for the ring—they sell such things in Wandeck and many of the

towns I have been visiting in Rhaetia. Did you not know that?"

"No, lady, I did not know it."

Nor, as a plain matter of fact, did Sylvia. She had first acted on impulse, and then spoken at random. The ring had been made to order from a design of her own, while she herself had painted the tiny miniature on ivory. But she had been urged by a sudden desire to see him lift the jewelled shield; and the time was not yet ripe for confessions. "Keep the trinket for your Kaiser's sake," she said.

"May I not keep it for yours as well?"

"Yes—if you bring me the milk."

The chamois-hunter caught up a gaudy jug, and, without further words, strode out. When he had gone, the Princess rose, and, lifting the knife he had used to slice the bread and ham, she kissed the handle on the place where his brown fingers had grasped it. "You are a very silly girl, my dear," she said. "But oh! how you do love him! And what an exquisite hour you are having!"

For ten minutes she sat alone; then the door was flung open and her host returned, no longer with the gay air that had sat like a new cloak upon him, but hot and sulky, the jug in his hand empty still.

"I could not milk the cow," he admitted shortly. "I chased one brute and then another; one I caught, but something was wrong with the abominable beast, for no milk would she give me,"

"Pray don't mind," Sylvia soothed him, hiding laughter. "You were kind to try. Luckily you're not the Kaiser, who prides himself on doing all things. I wonder, now, if *he* could milk a cow?"

"He should learn, if not," broke out the chamois-hunter. "There's no telling, it seems, when one may want the strangest accomplishments, and be shamed for lack of them."

"No, not shamed," protested Sylvia. "I am no longer thirsty, and you have been so good. See; while you were gone, I ate the bread-and-ham, and never did any meal taste better. Now, you will have many things to do; I've trespassed too long; and, besides, I have a friend waiting. Will you tell me by what name I shall remember you when I recall this day?"

"They named me—for the Kaiser."

"Oh, then I shall call you Max. *Max!* What a nice name! I like it, I think, as well as any I have ever heard. Will you shake hands for good-bye?"

The strong hand came out eagerly. "But it is not 'good-bye' *gnä Fräulein*. You must let me help you back to the path and down the mountain."

"I wished, but dared not ask that of you, lest—like your namesake—you were a hater of women."

"That is too hard a word, even for an Emperor, lady. While as for me—well, if I ever said to myself, 'Women are not much good to men as their companions,' I'm ready to unsay it."

"Then you shall come with me, and we'll look for the *Edelmann*, though I've wasted too much time over my pleasure. And you shall help me; and you shall help my friend, who is so strong-minded that she will perhaps make you think better of our sex. And you shall be our guide down to Heiligengelt, where we are staying at the inn. And you shall, if you will, carry our cloaks and rucksacks, which seem so heavy to us, but will be nothing for your strong shoulders."

The face of the chamois-hunter expressed such mirthful appreciation of her commands, that Sylvia turned her head away, lest he should guess she held a key to the inner situation. His willingness to become a beast of burden at the service of the English lady whom he had seen, and her whom he had yet to see, was undoubtedly genuine. For the next few hours he was free, it seemed—this namesake of the Emperor. He had been out before dawn, and had had good luck. Later, he had returned to the hut for a meal and rest, while his friends went down to the village on business. But he had meant all along to join them sooner or later; and he hoped that he might atone by his assistance for his failure with the cow.

"Do not go away thinking that we Rhaetians, Royal or peasant, are so cold of heart as you have fancied, *gna' Fräulein*," he said at last, when their *tête-à-tête* ended with a sight of Miss M'Pherson's

distant profile. "The torrent of our blood may sleep for a season under ice, but when the spring comes, and the ice is broken, then the torrent gushes forth more hotly, because it has not spent its strength before."

"I shall remember that," said Slyvia, "for—my journal of Rhaetia."

It was at this moment that the distant profile became a full face, with telescopic eye-glasses, gazing starwards.

"I thought you were never coming," exclaimed Miss M'Pherson; then stopped abruptly at the sight of the young man with bare knees.

"Perhaps I never should, had it not been for the help of this good friend," responded Sylvia; "for I got myself into unexpected difficulties up there. His name is Max, and he is a monarch of—chamois-hunters. Give him your rucksack and cape, dear Miss Collinson; Max is kind enough to be our guide down the mountain, as you seemed so timid about making the descent with me alone."

Miss M'Pherson, a staunch Royalist and firm believer in the divine right of kings, grew crimson as to nose and ears—a mute protest against this mischievous command. What a thing to have happened! Here was her adored young Princess leading the Imperial Eagle (disguised, indeed, yet Royal withal) a captive in chains. What an achieve-

ment even for all-conquering beauty, within the space of one short hour—short for so great a conquest, though it had appeared long enough in waiting. Such triumph was no more than a tribute due to that Rose-of-all-the-World, Princess Sylvia of Eltzburg-Neuwald, and must have been given her by the patron saint of lovers. But that Jane M'Pherson, daughter of a plain country parson of Dumbar-tonshire, should fling upon the sacred shoulders of an Emperor her brown canvas rucksack, stuffed with eggs and bread and cheese; her golf-cape, with goloshes in the pocket, was too monstrous. Her whole nature revolted against the suggestion of such *lèse-majesté*.

"Pray, dearest P—Mary," the unhappy lady stammered, "don't ask me to—really these things of mine are nothing. I can hardly feel their weight."

"All the better for our friend Max, since he is to carry them," came the calm response. "Help her to undo the buckles, please, Max. Now you may have the pleasure of giving her your arm."

CHAPTER IV

MAX *versus* MAXIMILIAN

"ACH Himmel!" exclaimed Frau Johann. And "Ach Himmel!" she exclaimed again, with frantic uplifting of the hands.

The Grand Duchess turned pale, for the landlady had suddenly exhibited these signs of emotion while passing a window of the private sitting-room. It was the hour for afternoon tea in England, for afternoon coffee in Rhaetia; and already the Princess's mother had begun to look nervously for the climbers' return. Naturally, at Frau Johann's outburst of excitement, her imagination pictured disaster.

"What—oh, what can you see?" she implored in piercing accents; but for once the courtesy due a guest was forgotten, and Frau Johann fled without giving an answer.

Half paralysed with apprehension, her mind conjuring some sight of terror, the Grand Duchess tottered to the window. Was there—yes, there was a procession. Oh, horror! They were perhaps bringing Sylvia down from the mountain, dead, her beau-

tiful face crushed out of recognition. Yet no—there was Sylvia herself, the central figure in that procession. A peasant, loaded with cloaks and rucksacks, headed the band, while Sylvia and Miss M'Pherson followed after.

The anxious mother had thrown wide the window, but as she was about to attract the truants' attention with an impromptu speech of welcome, the words were arrested on her lips. What was the matter with Frau Johann?

The old woman had popped out of the door like a Jack out of his box, sprung to the much-loaded peasant, and, almost rudely elbowing Miss M'Pherson aside, was distractedly tearing at the bundle of cloaks and rucksacks. Her inarticulate groans ascended to the Grand Duchess at the window, adding to the lady's increased bewilderment.

"What has the man been doing?" the Grand Duchess demanded. But nobody answered, because nobody heard.

"Pray let him carry our things indoors," Sylvia was insisting, while the peasant stood among the three women, apparently a prey to conflicting emotions. To the Grand Duchess, as she regarded the strange scene through her lorgnette, it seemed that his dark face expressed a mingling of amusement, annoyance, and embarrassment. He looked like a man who had somehow placed himself in a false position, and was torn betwixt a desire to laugh and to

fly into a rage. He frowned haughtily at Frau Johann, smiled at the two ladies, dividing his energies between secret gestures (which he evidently intended for the eye of the landlady alone) and endeavours to unburden himself, in his own time and way, of the load he carried.

More and more did the Grand Duchess wonder what was going on. Why did the man not speak out what he had to say? Why did Frau Johann at first seek to seize the things which he had on his back, then suddenly shrink away as if in fear, leaving the brown-faced peasant to his own devices? How had he contrived, with a look, to intimidate that brave and honest woman?

There was mystery here, thought the Grand Duchess; and she remembered dark tales of brigands, dreaded by all the country-folk, yet protected for very fear. She was painfully near-sighted, but by constant application of the lorgnette she arrived at a logical conclusion.

Frau Johann had doubtless been frightened at seeing her guests coming down the mountain in such evil company. She had rushed to their succour, trying to make sure that their belongings had not been tampered with. But those great brown eyes under the rakish hat had glared a secret warning, and Frau Johann has despairingly abandoned her championship of the ladies.

In the adjoining sitting-room, the Grand Duchess

had reason to know, were at that moment assembled some or all of the mysterious gentlemen stopping at the inn. They had probably been attracted to their window by the voices below ; and the Grand Duchess courageously resolved that, at the slightest sign of impudence on the part of the luggage-carrier, these noblemen should be promptly summoned by her to the rescue.

Her anxiety was even slightly allayed at this point in her reflections by the thought (she had not quite outgrown an innate love of romance) that the Emperor himself might rush to the succour of beauty in distress. His friends were in the next room, having come down from the mountains at noon, and there seemed little doubt that he was among them. If he had not already looked out from the window, and been astonished at the sight of so much loveliness, the Grand Duchess decided, upon an inspiration, that he must be induced to do so. She would help on Sylvia's cause and win her gratitude when the true story of this day should be told.

In a penetrating voice, which could not fail to reach the ears of those in the room adjoining hers, or the ears of the actors in the scene below, she adjured her daughter in English. This language was safest, she considered, as the desperado with the rucksacks could not understand and resent her criticism, while the flower of Rhaetian chivalry next door

would comprehend both the words and the necessity for action.

“Mary!” she shrieked, loyally remembering in her excitement the part she was playing. “Mary, where did you pick up that alarming-looking ruffian? I believe he intends to keep your rucksacks. Is there no man-servant about the place whom Frau Johann can call to her assistance?”

All four of the actors glanced up, aware for the first time of an audience. Had the Grand Duchess been less near-sighted, less agitated, she might have been surprised at the varying yet vivid expressions of the faces. But she saw only that the tall, dark-faced peasant, who had so glared at poor Frau Johann, was throwing off his burdens with sudden haste and roughness.

“I do hope he hasn’t stolen anything,” said the Grand Duchess. “Better not let him go until you have looked into your rucksacks. That silver drinking-cup you *would* take up”—

She paused, not so much in obedience to Sylvia’s quick reply, as in amazement at Frau Johann’s renewed antics. Was it possible that the landlady understood more English than her guests supposed, and feared lest the man with the bare knees—perhaps equally well-informed—might seek immediate revenge? Those bare knees alone were evidence against his character in the eyes of the Grand Duchess. They imparted a brazen, desperate air; and a

man who cultivated so long a space between stockings and trousers might easily be capable of any crime.

"Oh, mother, you are very much mistaken. This excellent young man is a great friend of mine, and has saved my life," Sylvia was protesting; and her words began at length to penetrate the ears of the Grand Duchess. Overwhelmed by their full import, she suffered a sudden revulsion of feeling, which caused her to catch at the window-curtains for support.

"Saved your life!" she echoed. "Then you have been in danger. Thank Heaven the young man is not likely to know English, or I should not soon forgive myself. Here is my purse. Give it to him, and come indoors at once. You really look ready to faint."

So speaking, she snatched from a table close by her purse, containing ten or twelve pounds in Rhaetian money; but before she could accomplish her dramatic purpose, flinging the guerdon literally at the misjudged hero's feet, Sylvia prevented her with an imploring gesture.

"He will take no reward for what he has done save our thanks, and those I give him now, for the second time," cried the girl. She then turned to the man, and made him a present of her hand, over which he bowed with the air of a courtier rather than the rough manner of a peasant. The Grand

Duchess still hoped that the Emperor might be at the window, as really it was a pretty sight, and presented a pleasing phase of Sylvia's character.

She eagerly awaited her daughter's approach, and having lingered to watch with impatience the rather ceremonious parting, she hastened to the door of the sitting-room to welcome the travellers as they came upstairs.

"My darling, who do you think was listening and looking from the window next ours?" she breathlessly inquired, when she had embraced her recovered treasure—for the secret of the adjoining room was too great to keep. "You can't guess? I'm surprised at that, since you are not ignorant of a certain person's nearness. Why, who but the Emperor himself?"

"Then he must have an astral body—a Doppelgänger," said Sylvia, "since he has been with me all day, and that was he to whom you offered your purse."

The Grand Duchess sat down; not so much because she desired to assume the sitting position as because she experienced a sudden weakening of the knees. For a moment she was unable to speculate: but a poignant thought passed through her brain. "Heavens! what have I done? And it may be that one day he will become my son-in-law."

Meanwhile, Frau Johann—a strangely subdued

Frau Johann—had droopingly followed the chamois-hunter into the house.

“My friend, you must learn not to lose your head,” said he, when she had timidly joined him in the otherwise deserted hall.

“Oh, but, your Majesty”—

“How many times must I remind you that His Majesty remains in Salzbrück or some other of his residences when I am at Heiligengelt? If you cannot remember, I must look for chamois elsewhere than on the Weisshorn.”

“I will not forget again, your—I mean, I will do my best. Yet never before have I been so tried. To see your noble and high-born shoulders loaded down as if—as if you had been but a common *Gepäck-träger* instead of”—

“A chamois-hunter? Don’t distress yourself, my friend. I have had a very good day’s sport.”

“It has given me a weakness of the heart, your—sir. How can I again order myself civilly to those ladies, who”—

“Who have afforded peasant Max a few amusing hours. Be more civil than ever, for my sake, friend. And, by the way, do you happen to know the names of the ladies? That one of them is Miss Collinson, I have heard; but the others”—

“They are mother and daughter, sir. The elder, who spoke, in her ignorance, such treasonable things from the window, is called by Miss Collinson ‘Lady

de Courcy.' The younger—the beautiful one—is also a miss; and I think her name is Mary. They talk together in English, and though I know few words of that language, I have heard 'London' mentioned not once, but many times between them. Besides, it is painted in big black letters on their boxes."

"You did not expect them here?"

"Oh, no, sir. Had anyone written at this season, when I am honoured by your presence, I should have answered that we were full, or the house closed,—or any excuse which occurred to me. But no strangers have ever remained in Heiligengelt, or arrived so late; and I was taken unawares when my son Alois drove them up last night. They are here but for a few days, on their way to Salzbrück, and so home, the pretty Miss de Courcy said; and I thought"—

"You did quite right, Frau Johann. Has my messenger come with letters?"

"Yes, your—yes, sir; just now also a telegram was brought up by another messenger, who came in a great hurry, and has but lately gone."

The chamois-hunter shrugged his shoulders and gave vent to an impatient sigh. "It is too much to expect that I should be left in peace for a single day, even here," he muttered as he moved toward the stairs.

To reach Frau Johann's best sitting-room (selfishly occupied, according to one opinion, by the gen-

tlemen absent all day upon the mountains) he was obliged to pass a door through which issued unusual sounds. Involuntarily he paused. Someone was striking the preliminary chords of *volkslied* on his favourite instrument, a Rhaetian improvement upon the zither. As he lingered, listening, a voice began to sing—such a voice! Softly seductive as the purring of a brook through a meadow; rich as the deepest notes of a nightingale in its first passion for the moon.

The song was the heart-broken cry of an old Rhaetian peasant, who, lying near death in a strange land, longs for the sunrise light on the mountain-tops at home, more earnestly than for heaven.

The listener did not move until the voice had died into silence. He knew, though he could not see, who the singer had been. It was impossible for the fat lady at the window, or the thin lady with the Baedeker, to own a voice like that. Only one there was who could so exhale her soul in the perfume of sound. To his fancy, it was like hearing the fragrance of a lily breathed aloud. In reality, it was Sylvia, with childish vanity, showing off her prettiest accomplishment, in order that the impression she had made might be deepened.

The man outside the door had heard many golden voices—golden in all senses of the word—but never before one which so strangely stirred his spirit, stirred it with a pain that was bitter, sweet and a

vague yearning for something he had never known. If he had been asked what was the thing for which he sighed, he could not, if he would, have told; for a man cannot explain that inner part of himself which he had never even tried to understand.

Before he had thought of moving, the beautiful voice, no longer plaintive, but swelling to triumphant brilliancy, broke into the national anthem of Rhaetia—warlike, calling her sons to face death singing, in her defence. It was as if a rainbow shower of diamonds had been flung into the sunshine, and the heart of the man who stood at the head of his nation thrilled with the response that never failed.

"She is an Englishwoman, yet she sings the Rhaetian music as I have never known a Rhaetian girl to sing it," he told himself, slowly passing on to his own door. "She is a new type of woman to me. A pity that she is not a Princess, or else—that Maximilian and Max the chamois-hunter are not two. Still, in such a case, the chamois-hunter would be no match for Miss de Courcy of London, so the weights would balance in the scales as unevenly as now."

He smiled, and sighed, and shrugged his shoulders once again. Then he opened the door of his sitting-room, to forget among certain documents which urged the importance of immediate return to duty, the difference between Max and Maximilian, the difference between women and women.

"Good-bye to the mountains, to-morrow morning," he said to his chosen comrades. "Hey for work and Salzbrück again!"

She was going to Salzbrück in a few days, according to Frau Johann. But Salzbrück was not Heiligengelt, and Maximilian the Emperor was not, at his palace, in the way of meeting tourists. It was good-bye to Miss de Courcy as well as to the mountains.

"She'll never know to whom she gave her ring," he thought, with the dense innocence of a man who has studied all books save women's looks. "And I'll never know who gives her a plain gold one for the finger on which she once wore this."

But in the next room, divided from him by a single wall, sat Princess Sylvia of Eltzburg-Neuwald.

"When we meet again at Salzbrück, he must never dream that I *knew* all the time," she was saying to herself. "Some day I shall long to confess. But I could only confess to a man who excused, because he loved me. And suppose that day should never come?"

CHAPTER V

NOT DOWN IN THE PROGRAMME

LETTERS of introduction for Lady de Courcy and her daughter to those best worth knowing among Rhaetia's *haute noblesse* were a part of the "plan" concocted in the Richmond garden—that plan which the Grand Duchess had seen and dreaded in Sylvia's shining eyes.

The widow of the Hereditary Grand Duke of Eltzburg-Neuwald was reported in the papers to be travelling with the Princess Sylvia in Canada and the United States. Fortunately for the plot, the elder lady had spent so many years in retirement in England, and had, even in her youth, met so few Rhaetians, that there was little fear of any embarrassing *contretemps*. Her objections to the unconventional attempt to win a lover, instead of resting content with a mere husband, were based on other grounds; Sylvia had overcome them, nevertheless; and, in the end, the Grand Duchess had proved not only docile, but positively fertile in expedient. She it was who had suggested, since the adoption of bor-

rowed plumes was a necessity, that de Courcy, her mother's maiden name, should be chosen.

One friend only had been taken into Sylvia's confidence, and that friend was a lady whose husband had been British Ambassador to the Rhaetian Court. She knew "everybody who was anybody" there, and had entered with a fearful joy into the spirit of the escapade. Exactly how it was to end she did not see; but, so far as she was concerned, that was a detail; and she had written for Lady de Courcy all the letters needful as an open sesame to the Court.

Sylvia did not wish to hurry away from Heiligen-gelt to Salzbrück, even though the inn was empty (save for her own small party) two days after their arrival. They had met: the rest lay on the knees of the gods. And since the best sitting-room was now at the ladies' disposal, it was but fair to Frau Johann that they should remain for a time, if only to make use of it. When they left at last, after a stay of a week, it was to go to Salzbrück for the great festivities which were to mark the Emperor's thirty-first birthday, an event enhanced in national importance by the fact that the tenth anniversary of his succession would fall on the same date. On the day of the journey, the Grand Duchess had a headache and was cross.

"I don't see what you've accomplished so far by this mad freak," she said fretfully to her daughter, in the train which carried them away from Pitz-

büchel. "We've been perched on a mountain-top, like the Ark on Ararat, for a week, our marrow freezing in our bones; and, after all, what have we to show for it—unless an incipient influenza?"

Sylvia had nothing to show for it; at least, nothing that she meant to show; but in a little scented silk bag which nestled against her heart lay a tiny folded piece of blotting-paper. If you looked at its reflection in a mirror, you saw, written twice over, in a firm, opinionated hand, the name, "Mary de Courcy." And Sylvia had found it in a book after Frau Johann had made the best sitting-room ready for new occupants. Therefore she loved Heiligen-gelt; therefore she thought with silent satisfaction of her visit there.

To learn her full name he must have made inquiries, for Miss M'Pherson had not uttered it on their progress down the mountain. It had been in his thoughts, or he would not have committed it to paper in a moment of idle dreaming. Through all her life Sylvia had known the want of money, but now she would not have taken a thousand pounds for the contents of the silken bag.

Hohenburg is the family name of Rhaetia's Emperors; therefore everything in Salzbrück that can be Hohenburg is Hohenburg; and it was at the Hohenburgerhof, Salzbrück's grandest hotel, that a suite of rooms had been hired for Lady de Courcy's party.

They had broken the journey at Wandeck; and Sylvia had so timed it that they should arrive in Salzbrück an hour before the first of the ceremonies on the birthday eve—the unveiling by the Kaiser of the great national statue of Rhaetia in the Maximilian Platz, exactly in front of the Hohenburgerhof. At the station they were told by the driver of their selected droschky that he would not be able to take the high, well-born ladies to the main door of the Hohenburgerhof, for the passage of carriages was forbidden in the Maximilian Platz, where the crowd had been assembling since dawn for the ceremony; and that he would be compelled to deposit them and their luggage at a side entrance.

As they left the station, from far away came a burst of martial music, a military band playing the national air which the chamois-hunter had heard the English girl singing at Heiligengelt. The shops were closed for the day; from nearly every window hung a flag or banner, while the old narrow streets and the broad new streets were festooned with bunting, wreaths of evergreen, and autumn flowers. Prosperous citizens in their best, peasants in gay holiday attire, streamed towards the Maximilian Platz. It seemed to Sylvia that the air tingled with expectation; she thought that she must have felt the magnetic thrill in it, even if she had shut her eyes and ears.

"We shall be in time. We shall see the ceremony from our windows," she excitedly said.

But at the hotel she encountered a keen disappointment. With many apologies the landlord explained that he had done his best for the ladies when he received their letter a week before, and that he had allotted them a good suite, with balconies, overlooking the river at the back of the house—the situation considered preferable on ordinary occasions. But, as to rooms in the front, it was impossible; they had all been taken more than six weeks in advance; one American gentleman was paying a thousand gulden for an hour's use of a small balcony leading off the drawing-room.

Sylvia was pale with disappointment. "I will go down into the crowd and take my chance," she said to her mother when they had been shown into the handsome rooms, so satisfactory in everything but situation.

"My dear—impossible!" exclaimed the Grand Duchess. "I could not think of allowing it. Only fancy what a crush there will be—people trampling on each other for places. You could see nothing."

"But I couldn't bear to stay shut up here," pleaded Sylvia, "while that music plays and the crowds shout themselves hoarse for the Emperor. Something inside me seems to say that I *must* be there. And Miss M'Pherson and I will take care of each other."

Somehow—she hardly knew how—consent was as

usual wrung from the Grand Duchess's reluctance, the only stipulation being that Sylvia and her chaperon should keep close to the hotel, returning at once if they found themselves borne away by the crowd.

Their rooms were on the first floor, and the girl hurried down the broad flight of marble stairs, without sending for the lift, Miss M'Pherson following upon her heels.

They could not get out by the front door, for people had paid for places there, and would not yield an inch even for a moment; while the two or three steps below and the pavement in front were closely blocked.

Matters began to look hopeless, but Sylvia would not yet be daunted. They tried the side entrance, and found it free, the street into which it led being comparatively empty; but, beyond, where it joined the great open square of the Maximilian Platz, there was a solid wall of human beings.

"We might as well go back," said Miss M'Pherson, who had not Sylvia's keenness for the undertaking. She was comfortably fatigued after the journey, and would rather have had a cup of tea than see fifty emperors unveil as many statues.

"Look at that man just ahead," whispered the Princess; "*he* doesn't mean to go back. Let us keep close behind him, and see what he's going to do. He has the air of one who has made up his mind to get

something or do something, which he won't easily give up."

Miss M'Pherson brought a critical gaze to bear upon the person indicated. He was striding rapidly along, a few yards in advance, only his back being visible; but it was a singularly determined back; and it was clad in a grey and crimson uniform. On his head he wore a cocked hat, adorned with an eagle's feather, fastened by a gaudy jewel. As Miss M'Pherson observed these details, she noted half unconsciously that the man's neck between the collar of his coat and the sleek black hair was yellow-white as old parchment.

"He looks like an official of some sort," she remarked. "Maybe the crowd will open to let him through."

"So I was thinking," hopefully responded Sylvia. "And when the crowd opens for him, if we're clever, it may open for us too. He's a hateful-looking man, and I have taken a dislike to him without a sight of his face; but we must use him if he were a Cairene cyce."

"He really *is* going through!" exclaimed Miss M'Pherson.

They were close upon their unconscious pioneer now; and as—in peremptory tones—he informed the human wall that it must divide to let him pass because he had come with a special message to the Lord Chancellor from the Burgomaster, the Princess Syl-

via of Eltzburg-Neuwald could have laid her hands upon the grey shoulders, epauletted with red.

The wall obeyed, evidently recognising the authority of his uniform. "It must be the secretary of Herr Hermann, the Burgomaster," Sylvia heard one man murmur knowingly to another. "Something of importance has, perhaps, been forgotten, or special news has been received and must be reported."

Good-naturedly the crowd gave way for the newcomer; and, to Sylvia's joy, she was sucked into the whirlpool in his wake. Near the front, people would have stopped her if they could, knowing that she, at least, had no official right of entrance; but at the critical instant the blue-and-silver uniformed band of Rhaetia's crack regiment, the "Kaiser's Own," struck up an air which told them the Emperor was approaching. Angry ones were content with keeping out the tall, thin English spinster in tweed, hustling and pushing her into the background, when she would shrilly have protested in her native tongue that "really, *really* she *must* be allowed to pass with her friend!"

The man who had announced his mission from the Burgomaster must have felt that someone pressed after him with particularity, for, as he reached the front rank of the densely packed pavement, he wheeled sharply round. Sylvia, her little chin almost resting on his shoulder, met his gaze, shrinking

away from the breath that swept hot across her cheek.

"Just the face I gave his back credit for," she thought ungratefully. "Sly and cruel, brutal, too—and, how curiously pale!"

A pair of black eyes, small, glassy, with a peculiar flatness of the cornea, had aimed at her a glance of suspicion; and she seemed still to feel their penetrating stare, when the face was turned away again. Having obtained his desire—a position in the front rank of spectators, and incidentally a place for Sylvia too—the man in grey and red proceeded to take from his breast a roll of parchment, tied with narrow ribbon and sealed with a crimson seal.

Sylvia, standing shouldered to shoulder with him, had just time to wonder if the fellow were going to read some proclamation, when a great cheer arose from thousands of throats; men waved their hats; peasant women held up their children, while ladies threw roses from the decorated balconies. A white figure on a white charger came riding into the square, under the gay-coloured triumphal arch of flags and flowers.

Others followed; men in rich dark uniforms, on coal-black horses; yet Sylvia saw only one, glittering white from head to foot, like hoar-frost in sunlight. Under the shining helmet of steel, the earnest face looked clear-cut as cameo. To the crowd he was the Kaiser—a fine, popular, clever young man, who

ruled his country well, and, above all, provided many a pleasing spectacle; to the girl he was an ideal St. George, strong and brave to slay all modern dragons, right all crying wrongs.

How stately and splendid he looked, controlling the white charger, with its clanking silver trappings; how the jewelled orders on his breast sparkled, as he saluted his enthusiastic subjects!

“What if he should never love me?” Sylvia thought, as she often thought, with a sharp, jealous spasm of the heart.

Now he was vaulting from his horse, while men in uniforms, men with ribbons and decorations, came forward, bowing, to receive him. The ceremony of unveiling the statue of Rhaetia, executed by one of the world’s most famous sculptors, was about to begin.

To reach the great crimson-draped platform on which he was presently to take his stand, the Emperor must pass within a few yards of Sylvia. His eyes travelled over the brightly coloured throng; what if they should fall upon her? The girl’s heart was in her throat; she could feel it beating there; and for a moment the tall white figure was lost in a mist that rose before her eyes.

She had forgotten how she came there—forgotten the stranger in grey and red to whom she owed her great good fortune; when suddenly, while the mist was at its thickest, she grew conscious of the

man's presence. So near her he stood, that a quick start, a gathering of his muscles for a spring, flashed like a message by telegraph through her own body. The mist clouding her senses was burnt up in the flame of a strange enlightenment—a clarity of vision which showed not only the hero of the day, the crowd, and the man beside her, but the guilty soul of that man as well.

“He is going to kill the Emperor!”

It was as if a voice hissed the words into her ears; she knew now why she had struggled to win this place, why she had succeeded, what she had to do—or die in failing to do.

The Emperor was not half a dozen yards away. She alone had felt that murderous thrilling, heard that panting breath; she alone guessed what the roll of parchment hid.

While the crowd shouted for “Unser Max!” a figure, grey and red, leapt toward the white one, with clenched hand upraised, something sharp and bright catching the sun in a streak of steely light as it rose and fell.

Maximilian saw, yet not in time to swerve aside. The blade swooped hawk-like, scenting blood. A second's fraction, and it would have drunk deep—a Royal draught; but an arm struck it up; and a girl was sobbing; while for her the heavens above and the earth below merged together in whirling chaos.

The man in red and grey was like a fox among the hounds; and the crowd, in the madness of sudden rage, would have rent him limb from limb, despite the cordon of police that quickly gathered round him; but the Emperor's ringing voice commanded instant obedience. Only those in the front ranks, or the windows above, had seen the attack and the unknown girl's intervention; yet the shouts of those who had witnessed the furious rush forward, the shrieks of the ladies on the balconies, flashed the news through the Maximilian Platz that there had been an attempt on the Kaiser's life. That little yellow man in the Burgomaster's red and grey—he who had pushed past everybody on the pretence of official business—he it was who had done the deed. Kill him—kill him!—trample him down, tear out the vile heart of him and fling it to the dogs! What of the police? This is not their affair, but the people's—the people who love “Unser Max” and would die for the Kaiser. Away with the police!—but no—silence, silence for the Kaiser. What is that he is saying? “My people shall not be murderers; let the law deal with the madman—it is my command. Three cheers for the lady to whom your Kaiser owes his life, and then the ceremonies shall go on!”

Three cheers? Three times three, and split the skies with shouts for the Kaiser. How the women cry, when they ought to be laughing! A chance now for the police to hurry the limp thing in grey and red

away out of sight and off to prison, for everyone turns to the Emperor, just saved from the assassin's knife. He has sprung up the steps of the great crimson-covered platform, half carrying, half leading, a beautiful pale girl, who stifles her hysterical sobbing and tries to hide the blood that drips from a wound in her arm. Who is she? Has anyone seen her before? God grant it is a Rhaetian who had had the good fortune and the courage to save the Emperor's life! Yet what does it matter? There he stands, well and unhurt, holding her by his side, that all the people may see her and give thanks. She is worthy to be a goddess in their eyes; the radiance of her beauty—as for a few seconds she stands gazing up into his face, then hiding hers between trembling hands—seems supernatural. It is only for a moment that they see her, as the shouts of praise to Heaven, and the cheers for Maximilian and the stranger who saved him, drown the music for which a signal has been given; for the programme of the day is to be finished and the episode to be set aside.

“God keep our Kaiser!” the band plays; and, as if the order of events had been undisturbed, the ceremony of unveiling the statue goes on.

CHAPTER VI

THE HONOURS OF THE DAY.

IT is those in the thick of battle who can afterwards tell least about it, and to the Princess those five potent moments—the most tremendous, the most vital of her life—were in memory like a dream. She had felt a tigerish quiver run through the body of a man when the crowd pressed close against her; instinct was responsible for the rest. Vaguely she recalled later that she had run forward and thrown up the arm that meant to strike; an impression of the knife, as the light struck it, alone remained vividly in her mind. She had thought of the thud it would make in falling, of the life-blood that would spout from the rent in the white coat, among the jewels and decorations. She had thought of the blankness of existence for her in a world empty of Maximilian, and she had known that, unless she could save him, it would be far better to die—then, in that moment.

More than this she had not thought or known. What she did was done well-nigh unconsciously,

and she seemed to wake with a start at last, to hear herself sobbing, and to feel a sharp pain in her arm.

A hundred hands—not quick enough to save, yet quick enough to follow the lead she had given—had fought to seize the assassin, and prevent a second blow; while as for Sylvia, her work done, she forgot everything and everyone but Maximilian.

It was he who kept her from falling, as the knife aimed at his heart struck her arm; he who held her, as she mechanically clung to him, half fainting—brave no longer, but only a frightened, weeping girl.

Sylvia heard him speak to the crowd—a few words that rang out through the furious babel like a cathedral bell. Still he held her; and she went with him up the steps of the red platform, because his arm compelled her, not by her own volition.

She hardly understood that the cheers of the multitude were for her as well as for him; and words separated themselves with comprehensive distinctness for the first time, when, the necessity for public action over, the Emperor turned to whisper in her ear. “Thank you—thank you,” he said. “You are the bravest woman in the world. I had to keep them from killing that coward, but now I can say to you what is in my heart. I pray Heaven you are not much hurt?”

“Oh, no, not hurt, but very happy,” breathed Sylvia, hardly knowing what she said. She felt like a soul without a body; what could it matter if her arm

ached or bled? The Emperor was safe, and she had saved him—she!

He pointed to her sleeve. "The knife struck you. I would that I could go with you myself, when you have done so much for me. Yet duty keeps me here; you understand that. Baron von Lynar and the Baroness will take you home at once. They"—

"But I would rather stay and see the rest," said Sylvia. "I am quite well now, so that I can go down to my friend"—

"If you stay, you must stay here," said Maximilian. "After what you have done, it is your place."

The ladies of the Court, who had with their husbands been waiting to receive the Emperor, crowded round her, as he turned to them with an expressive look and gesture. A seat was given her; she was a heroine, sharing the honours of the day with its hero.

There was scarcely a *grand dame* among the distinguished company on the Emperor's platform to whom "Lady de Courcy" and her daughter had not a letter of introduction, from their friend. But no one knew at this moment of any other title to their acquaintance which the girl possessed, except the right conferred by her deed. All smiled on her with tearful eyes, though there were some who would have given their ten fingers to have had her praise and credit for their own.

Sylvia sat through the ceremonies, unconscious

that thousands of eyes were on her face, aware of little that went on; scarcely seeing the statue of Rhaetia, whose glorious marble womanhood awakened the enthusiasm of the throng, hearing only the short stirring speech delivered by Maximilian.

When it was all over—the people merely waiting to see the Emperor ride away and the great personages disperse, while the music played—Maximilian turned once more to Sylvia. Everyone was listening; everyone was looking on, and, no matter what his inclination, his words could be but few. He thanked her again for her courage, and for remaining, as if that had been a favour to him; asked where she was staying in town, and promised himself the pleasure of sending to inquire for her health during the evening. His desire would be to call at once in person, but, owing to the programme of the day and those immediately following, not only each hour, but each moment, would be officially occupied. These birthday rejoicings were troublesome, but duty must be done. And then Maximilian finished by saying that the Court physician would be commanded to attend upon her at the hotel.

With this and a chivalrous courtesy of parting, he was gone from the platform, Baron von Lynar, the Grand Master of Ceremonies, and his Baroness, having been told off as the fair heroine's escort home.

At another time, it might have amused the mis-

chief-loving Sylvia to see Baroness von Lynar's surprise at learning her identity with the Miss de Courcy of whom she had heard from Lady West. All the letters of introduction had reached their destination, it only remaining (according to Rhaetian etiquette in such matters) for Lady de Courcy to announce her arrival in Salzbrück by sending cards. But Sylvia had no thought of mischief now. She had been on the point of forgetting, until reminded by necessity, that she was only a masquerader, acting her borrowed part in a pageant. For the first time since she had voluntarily taken it up, that part became distasteful. She would have given much to throw it off, like a discarded garment, and be herself again. Nothing less than absolute sincerity seemed worthy of this day and its event.

But in the vulgar language of proverb, which no well-brought-up Princess should ever use, she had made her bed, and she must lie in it. It would never do for her to suddenly announce that she was *not* Miss de Courcy, but Princess Sylvia of Eltzburg-Neuwald. That would not now be fair to her mother, nor to herself; above all, it would not be fair to the Emperor, handicapped by his debt of gratitude. Miss de Courcy she was, and Miss de Courcy she must for the present remain.

Naturally, the Grand Duchess fainted when her daughter was brought back to her, bleeding. But the wound in the round white arm was not deep.

The Court physician was both consoling and complimentary, and by the time that messengers from the palace had arrived with inquiries from the Emperor and invitations to the Emperor's ball, the heroine's mother could dispense with her *sal volatile*.

She had fortunately much to think of. There was the important question of dress (since the ball was for the following night); there was the still more pressing question of the newspapers, which must not be allowed to learn or publish the borrowed name of de Courcy, lest complications should arise; and there were the questions which had to be asked of Sylvia. How *had* she felt? How had she *dared*? How had the Emperor *looked*, and what had the Emperor *said*? If it had been natural for the Grand Duchess to faint, it was equally natural that she should not faint twice. She began to see, after all, the hand of Providence in her daughter's prank. And she wondered whether Sylvia's white satin with seed pearls or the gold-spangled blue tulle would be more becoming for the ball.

Next day the papers were full of the dastardly attack upon the Emperor by a French anarchist, who had disguised himself as an employé in the official household of the Burgomaster, trusting to the abstraction of the crowd at the last moment before the ceremonies, for passing undiscovered and accomplishing his murderous design. There were columns devoted to praise of the extraordinary courage and

beauty of the young English lady, who, with marvellous presence of mind, had sprung between the Emperor and his would-be assassin, receiving on her own arm the blow intended for the Imperial breast. But, thanks to a few earnestly imploring words spoken in Baron von Lynar's ear, commands given to the "Besitzer" of the hotel, and the fact that Rhaetian editors are not yet permitted a wholly free hand, the young English lady was not named. She was a stranger; she was, according to the papers, "as yet unknown."

CHAPTER VII

TEN MINUTES' GRACE

Not a window of the fourteenth-century yellow marble palace, in its famous "garden of the nine fountains," that was not ablaze with light, glittering against a far dark background of snow-capped mountains. From afar, the crowd that might not pass the carved lions or the statuesque sentinels at the gates, stared, and pointed, and exclaimed, without jealousy of their betters. "Unser Max" was giving a ball; it was for them to watch the glittering line of state coaches and neat closed carriages that passed in and out—striving for a peep at the faces, the grand uniforms and the jewelled dresses, commenting, laughing, wondering what there would be for supper and with whom the Emperor would dance.

"There she is—there's the beautiful young lady who saved him! Isn't she like an angel?" cried a girl in the throng. Up went a hearty cheer, and the police had to keep back the good-natured flock that

would have stopped the horses and pressed forward for a long look into a plain dark-green brougham. Sylvia shrank out of sight against the cushions, blushing and breathing quickly, as she pressed her mother's hand.

"Dear people—dear, kind people," she thought. "I love them for loving him."

She had chosen to wear the white dress, though up to the last minute her mother had hesitated between the rival merits of seed pearls and gold span-gles; and her beautiful face was as white as her gown, as the two ladies passed between bowing lack-eyes into the palace, through the great marble hall, on through the Rittersaal, to the throne-room, where the Emperor's guests awaited his coming.

It was etiquette for no one to arrive later than ten o'clock; and five minutes after that hour, Baron von Lynar, in his official capacity as Grand Master of Ceremonies, struck the floor thrice with his ivory, gold-knobbed wand. This signified the approach of the Court from the Imperial dinner party, and Maximilian entered, with a singularly plain Russian Royal Highness on his arm.

Until the moment of his arrival the lovely stranger (admitted here by virtue of her service to the Emperor) had held all eyes; and even when he appeared she was not forgotten. Everyone wished to see how she would be greeted by a grateful monarch.

The instant that his proud head—towering above

most others—was seen in the throne-room, it was observed, even by the unobservant, that never had Maximilian been so handsome. His was a face notable for strength and intellect rather than any conventional beauty of feature; but to-night the stern lines that sometimes marred his forehead were smoothed away. He looked young, almost boyish; there was an eager light in his dark eyes, and he gave the impression of a man who had suddenly found a new interest in life.

He danced the first dance with the Russian Royalty, who was the most important guest of the evening, and, still rigidly adhering to the line of duty (which obtains in Court ballrooms as on battlefields), the second, third, and fourth dances were for Maximilian penances rather than pleasures. But for the fifth—a waltz—he bowed low before Sylvia.

Not a movement, scarcely a smile or a glance of hers that he had not seen, since his eyes first sought and found her, on the moment of his entrance. He had noted how well Baron von Lynar carried out his instructions regarding Miss de Courcy; he knew the partners who were presented to her for each dance, and to save his life or a national crisis he could not have worn the same expression in asking the Russian for a waltz as that which brightened his face in approaching Sylvia.

“Who is that girl?” inquired Count von Markstein in his usual gruff manner, as the arm of Max-

imilian circled the slim waist and the eyes of Maximilian rested on a radiant countenance upturned to his.

It was of Baroness von Lynar that the Chancellor asked his question, and she fluttered a diamond-spangled fan to hide smiling lips, as she answered, "What, Chancellor—are you in jest, or do you really not know?"

Count von Markstein turned his cold eyes from the two figures, so close together, moving rhythmically as poetry—to the face of the middle-aged beauty. Once he had admired her as much as it was in his nature to admire any woman; but that day was long past, and now, such power as she had left over him was merely to excite a feeling of irritation.

"I do not often jest," he answered slowly.

"Ah, we all know that truly great men have seldom a sense of humor!" purred the Baroness, who was by birth an Austrian, and loved laughter better than anything else in the world—except her vanishing beauty. "I should have remembered, and not tried your patience. 'That girl,' as you somewhat brusquely call her, is the English Miss de Courcy, whose mother has come to Salzbrück armed with such sheaves of introductions to us all. And she it is who yesterday saved the most valued life in the Empire. They are staying at the Hohenburgerhof; I thought you must have known."

"I did not see the young lady's face yesterday,"

returned the Chancellor, whose indifference to women and merciless justice to both sexes alike had early earned him the sobriquet of "Iron Heart." "As for what this girl did, if it had not been she who intervened, it would have been another. It was merely by a chance that her arm struck up the weapon first."

"Do you not think that His Majesty does right to single her out for so much honour?" Baroness von Lynar's eyes were on the dancers, yet that mysterious skill which some women have, enabled her to see the slightest change of expression on the Chancellor's square, lined countenance.

"His Majesty could not do otherwise," he replied. "An invitation to a ball; a dance or two; a call to pay his respects; a gentleman could not be less gracious. And His Majesty is a most chivalrous gentleman."

"He has had good training." This with a smile and the dainty ghost of a bow to the man who had been as a second father to Maximilian, when his own father had died. "But—we are old friends, Chancellor" (it had not been her fault that they were not more, in the days before she was Baroness von Lynar); "do you *really* think it will end with an invitation, a dance, and a call? Look at the girl's face, and tell me that?"

Old "Iron Heart" frowned and glared, and wondered what he had seen twenty years ago to admire in this woman. He would have escaped if he could,

but he would not be openly rude to the wife of the Grand Master of Ceremonies; and besides, he was willing perhaps to show the lady that her innuendoes were as the buzzing of a fly about his ears.

"I am half-way between sixty and seventy, and no longer a judge of a woman's attractions," he retorted. "Even were she Helen herself, the invitation, the dance, and the call—with the present of some jewelled souvenir, perhaps—are all that are permissible in the circumstances."

"What circumstances?" was the innocent, questioning reply.

"The young lady is not of Royal blood. And His Majesty—thank God!—is not a *roué*."

"But he has a heart, and he has eyes. He may never have used them before. Yet there must always be a first time; and the higher and more strongly built the tower, the greater the fall thereof."

"Need we discuss improbabilities, Baroness von Lynar? Neither you nor I is the Emperor's keeper."

"We are his friends—his most intimate friends. And you and I have known each other for twenty years. It amuses me to discuss what you call 'improbabilities.' Come—for once, humour me, Chancellor. Not for the world would I hint that His Majesty is less than an example to all men, in honour; nor would I suggest that Miss de Courcy could be tempted to indiscretion. But yet I'd be ready to wager—the Emperor being human and the girl the

most dazzling of beauties—that an acquaintance so romantically begun will *not* end with a ball and a call!”

“What could there possibly be more, madam—in honour?”

The Chancellor’s voice shook with stifled anger, and he looked—so thought his quondam friend—with his square face, his wide nostrils, and his prominent eyes—delightfully like a baited bull. The Baroness von Lynar was thoroughly enjoying herself. She well knew the old man’s desire for the Emperor’s marriage, and, though she was not in the secret of his plans, would have felt little surprise at learning that an eligible Princess had already been selected. What fun it was to ruffle the temper of the surly old bear! How much more fun it would be genuinely to alarm him for the success of his schemes!

“What could there be more?” she echoed. “Why, they will see much of each other. There will be many dances, many calls—in a word, a serial romance instead of a short story. Why should His Majesty not know the pleasure of a pure platonic friendship with a beautiful young woman?”

“Because Plato is out of fashion, and, as I have said, the Emperor is a man of honour,” growled the Chancellor. “Even if—which I doubt—a woman could deeply influence his life”—

"You doubt that? Then you don't know the Emperor!"

"If it were so, when he felt the danger he would keep aloof for the woman's sake. You tell me this English miss is at an hotel in Salzbrück. What would be said if Maximilian continually visited her there? To meet her incognito would be an insult. For the Emperor of Rhaetia to call upon a young woman day after day at the Hohenburgerhof would bring a storm of scandal about her ears. That would be but poor reward for the young woman who saved his life."

Baroness von Lynar flushed faintly, under the delicate apology of her rouge. For the fraction of a second she looked rather blank, for she had insisted upon the argument, and it was going against her. She had not stopped to view the question from every side, in her haste to annoy the Chancellor. So far she had only vexed him. She owed him a great deal more than a petty stab of vexation—a debt which during twenty years, she had been repaying in small instalments. If she could prove her point now—or rather, if Maximilian would prove it for her, and she could wipe the slate clean once and for ever from the obligations of revenge, it would be something to live for. Yet how was that to be done, since Count von Markstein was in the right about his Imperial master?

But the wife of the Grand Master of Ceremonies

was a woman of resource. The cloud on her still handsome face gradually lifted, and she beamed more brightly than before. The little pin-point prick she had inflicted need not be an anti-climax after all.

"Dear Chancellor, how well you know His Majesty!" she ejaculated. "If—being but a young man, and a hot-blooded one, despite his high principles and his former indifference to women—he should not stop to count the cost for himself, you would no doubt take advantage of your warm friendship to remind him?"

"I should indeed do so," said the Chancellor grimly, "were there the slightest chance of such necessity arising."

"It is but a piece with your well-known integrity and courage. What a comfort, therefore, that the necessity is *unlikely* to arise!"

The old man stared her in the face. "I must have misunderstood you," he sneered. "I thought, in your opinion, the opposite conclusion was foregone?"

"But"—(and the Baroness smiled her most charming smile) "suppose that Lady de Courcy and her daughter were not remaining at the hotel?"

The Chancellor's cold eyes brightened—for, in reality, she had given him an uneasy moment. "Ah then they are going away?"

"I hear," returned Baroness von Lynar slowly, pleasantly, and distinctly, "that they have been asked

to the country to visit one of His Majesty's oldest and most intimate friends."

Maximilian was said not to care for dancing, though he danced well—as it was his pride to excel in everything worth doing. Certainly there was usually a perfunctoriness about his manner in a ball-room, a suggestion of a man on duty, in his grave face, his readiness to lead a partner to her seat when a dance was over.

But to-night! The white arm on his—the girlish arm that had been firm as a man's in his defence; the perfume of her hair, and the glamour of the light upon it; the beating of her heart near his as they danced—(or did he only fancy that he felt it?); the glory of her eyes, when they were lifted from a wonder-shadow of lashes; the lissom grace of her girlhood, contrasting with the voluptuous summer of Rhaetian types of beauty; the rose flush that spread and spread from her cheeks to the Madonna arch of her brows, as he looked, because he could not help looking!—To-night was different from any other night, because she was different from any other woman; Maximilian fancied that an accident had befallen the musicians when the music for that waltz came suddenly, as it seemed, to an end.

At the Rhaetian Court there was always a stately interval of ten minutes after each dance. But what

are ten minutes to a man who has things to say which could not be said in ten hours?

They had hardly spoken yet—since the day on the mountain; and, at this moment, each was wondering whether or no the memory of that day should be ignored. Maximilian did not intend to speak of it; Sylvia did not intend to speak of it. But then, how few matters turn out as people plan!

Next to the throne-room was the ballroom; and beyond was another called the "Waldsaal." Maximilian had had this fitted up for his own pleasure; and it was named the "Waldsaal" because it represented a forest. Walls and ceiling were skilfully covered with thickly growing creepers, trained over invisible wires, through which peeped stars of electric light, like the checquers of sunshine that stray between netted branches. There were realistic grottoes of dark rock, growing trees planted in huge boxes hidden by ivy; while here and there, out of shadowed corners, glared the glassy eyes of birds and animals—eagles, bears, stags, and chamois—that the Emperor had shot. This room, so vast as to appear empty when dozens of people wandered under its trees and among its rock grottoes, was thrown open to the dancers whenever a ball was given at the palace; and, because of its novel and curious effect, it was more popular than the conservatories and palm-houses. It was here that Maximilian led Sylvia after their waltz; and as she laid her hand upon

his arm, an almost overmastering desire seized him to kiss the long white glove, upon the wound she had received for him.

"This is madness," he said to himself. "It must pass." And aloud, meaning to say something else—something courteous and commonplace, he exclaimed, "Why did you do it?"

Sylvia glanced up at him in surprise.

"I don't understand." And then, in an instant, well-nigh before the words were out, she *did* understand. She knew that he had not intended to ask the question; but, having spoken, it was characteristic of him to stand by his guns.

"I mean—the thing I shall have to thank you for always," he replied.

If Sylvia had been given time to think, she might have prepared an answer. But, given no time, she told only the bald truth. "I couldn't help it."

He looked straight into her eyes. "You couldn't help risking your life to"—He did not finish.

"It was to save"—Her words also died incomplete.

Then it was that he forgot various restrictions of etiquette which an Emperor, in conversing with a commoner—be the commoner man or woman—is not supposed to neglect.

For one thing, his voice grew unsteady, and his tone was eager as that of some ineligible subaltern with the girl of his first love.

"There is something I should like to show you," he said. Opening a button of the military coat, blazing with jewels and orders, he drew out a loop of thin gold chain. At the end dangled some small object that flashed under a star of electric light.

"My ring!" exclaimed Sylvia in a breathless whisper.

Thus perished the Emperor's intention to ignore the day that had been theirs in the past.

"Your ring. You gave it to Max; he has kept it. He will always keep it. Are you surprised?"

Sylvia wished to say "Yes," but instead she answered "No," because pretty fibs require preparation; it is only the truth that speaks itself.

"You are not? Then—you guessed, yesterday?"

"I knew—at Heiligengelt. But I wish I need not tell you."

Silence between them for a moment, while Maximilian digested her answer, slowly realising what it meant. He remembered the bread and ham; the cow, and the rucksacks; he remembered everything—and laughed out, boyishly.

"You knew, at Heiligengelt! But not on the mountain when"—

"Yes, I knew even then. It was only a chance—the same adventure might have happened to hundreds of people without their guessing. But I had—happened to hear that you went there sometimes,

and I had seen many of your pictures—so, when I met a man, I—oh, I wish you had not asked me!”

“Why?”

“Because—one might have to be afraid of an Emperor if he were angry.”

“Do I look angry?”

Their eyes met, and dwelt, laughing at first, then probing unexpected depths which drove away all thought of laughter. Something that seemed alive and independent of control leapt in Maximilian’s breast. He shut his lips tightly. Both forgot that a question had been asked, though it was Sylvia who spoke first,—since it is easier for a woman than a man to hide feeling behind conventionality.

“I wonder you kept the ring after—all my rudeness.”

“I had a special reason for keeping the ring.”

“Will you tell it me?”

“You are quick at forming conclusions, Miss de Courcy. Can’t you guess?”

“To remind you never to help strange young women on mountains?”

“No—not for that.”

“I am not to ask the reason?”

“On that day you asked what you chose. All the more should you do so now, since there is nothing I could refuse you.”

“Not the half of your kingdom—like the Royal men in fairy stories?”

The light words struck a chord they had not aimed to touch. They went echoing on and on, till they reached that inner part of himself which the Emperor knew least—his heart. Half his kingdom? Yes, he would give it to her, if he could. Heavens! what such a partnership would be!

"Ask anything you will," he said, as a man speaks in a dream.

"Then tell me—why you kept the ring?"

"Because the only woman I ever cared—to make my friend, took it from her finger and gave it to me."

"Now the Emperor is pleased to pay compliments."

"You don't think that, really? You know I am sincere."

"But you had only seen me for an hour. Instead of meriting your friendship, I had, on the contrary"—

"For one hour? How long ago is that hour? A week or so, I suppose,—as time counts. But then came yesterday, and the thing you did for me. Now I have known you always."

"If you had, perhaps you would not want me for your friend."

"I do want you."

The words would come. It was true—already true. He did want her. But not only as a friend.

His world, a world without women or passion ardent enough to eclipse principles, was upside down.

It was well that the ten minutes' grace between dances was over, the music for the next about to begin. A young officer, Count von Markstein's half-brother, who was to be Sylvia's partner, came toward her, then stepped back, seeing that she was with the Emperor. But Maximilian permitted his approach, with a gesture.

"Good-bye," said Sylvia, while her words could still only be heard by the ears for which they were intended.

"Not good-bye—we are to be friends."

"Yes, in heart. But—we shall not often meet."

"Are you going from Salzbrück soon, then?"

"Perhaps."

"I must see you. I will see you—*once more*, whatever comes!"

"Yes. Once more, but"—

"After that"—

"Who knows?—Captain von Markstein?—Yes, it is our dance."

"Once more—once more!" The words lingered in Sylvia's ears. She heard them through everything, as one hears the undertone of a mountain torrent, though a brass band brays out some martial air to drown its music.

Once more he would see her. She could guess

why it might be only once, even if he would fain have had it more. This game of hers, begun with such a light heart, was more difficult to play than she had dreamed. If she could be but sure that he *cared*; if he would tell her this, in words, the rest might be easy; though, even so, she did not quite see how the end should come. Yet how, in honour, *could* he tell her that he cared? While, if he told her in any other way, how could she bear her life? "Once more!" What would happen in that once more? Surely nothing but a repetition of grateful thanks and courteous words, equivalent to farewell.

To be sure, Miss de Courcy and her mother might go away, and the negotiations between the Emperor's advisers and the Grand Duchess of Eltzburg-Neuwald for her daughter's hand could be allowed to continue, as if no outside influence had ruffled the peaceful current of events. Then, in the end, a surprise would come for Maximilian; wilful Princess Sylvia would have had her little romance, and all might be said to end well. But something within Sylvia's fast-beating heart refused to be satisfied with so comparatively tame a last chapter, a *finis* so obvious. She had tasted a sweet, stimulating draught—she who had been brought carefully up on milk and water—and she was loth to put the cup down, still half full and sparkling.

"Once more!" If only that once could be magni-

fied into many times; if she could have her chance—her “fling,” like other girls!

So she was thinking in the carriage, by her mother's side, driving back to the Hohenburgerhof from the palace; and the Grand Duchess was forced to speak twice before her daughter became aware that silence had been broken.

“I forgot to tell you something, Sylvia.”

“Ye—es, mother?”

“Your great success has made me absent-minded, child. You looked like a shining white lily among all those handsome overblown Rhaetian women.”

“Thank you, dear. Was that what you forgot to say?”

“Oh, no! It was this. The Baroness von Lynar has been most kind. She urges us to give up our rooms at the hotel, on the first of the week, and join her house party at Schloss Lynarberg. It is only a few miles out of town. What do you think of the plan?”

“Leave—Salzbrück?”

“She has asked a number of friends—to meet the Emperor.”

“Oh! He did not speak of it—when we danced.”

“But she has mentioned it to him since, no doubt—before giving the invitation. Intimate friend of his as she is, she would not dare to ask people to meet him, if he had not first sanctioned the suggestion. Still, she can afford to be more or less informal. The

Baroness was dancing with the Emperor, I remember now, just before she came to me. They were talking together quite earnestly. I can recall the expression of his face."

"Was it pleased, or"—

"I was wondering what she had said to make him look so happy. Perhaps"—

"What answer did you give Baroness von Lynar?"

"I told her—I thought you wouldn't mind—I told her that we would go."

CHAPTER VIII

THE BEAR IN HIS DEN

SCHLOSS LYNARBERG stands high on a promontory overlooking a lake, half a dozen miles to the south of Salzbrück. The castle is modern, with pointed turrets and fretted minarets, and, being built of marble, throws a dazzling reflection, like a great submerged swan, into the blue waters of the Kaisersee. Everything about the place, from its tropical gardens to its terraced roofs, suggests luxury, gaiety, pleasure.

On the opposite bank of the lake frowns the ancient fortified stronghold of the Counts von Markstein, squatting on its rocky base like a huge black dragon on the coils of its own tail. Its small, deep-set windows glare across the bright waters at the white splendour of Lynarberg, like the jealous eyes of the monster waiting its chance to spring upon and devour a beautiful young maiden.

The moods of Baroness von Lynar, regarding dark old Schloss Markstein, had varied during her

residence by the lake. Sometimes she pleased herself by reflecting that the man who had slighted her lived in less luxury than she had made her own. Again, the thought that "the old bear" could crouch in his den and observe all that went on at Lynarberg, got upon her nerves. She could have shrieked and shaken her fist at the huddled mass of stone across the water. But, during the first days of the Emperor's visit at her house, she often glanced at the grim outlines of the castle, and smiled.

"Can you see, old bear?" she would say to herself. "Are you watching, over there? Do you guess *now* who is responsible for the growth of this love-flower you'd stick your claws into and tear, if you could? But you can't, you know. There's nothing you can do,—nothing but sit there and growl, and realise that you've been outwitted for once—by a woman, too. How do you like the prospect, old bear? Do you lie awake at night and wonder what's to become of your fine schemes for the Emperor's marriage? After all, there are some things which can be done by a woman with tact and money, pleasant houses and an easy-going husband, that the cleverest of statesmen can't undo. Will you admit so much at last, old grisly one?"

Thus the Baroness would amuse herself at odd moments, when she was not busily arranging original and elaborate entertainments for her guests. And she rejoiced especially at having had the forethought

to invite Otto von Markstein, the Chancellor's half-brother. There was a barrier of nearly thirty-five years' difference in age between the two men, and they had never been friends, for the elder was temperamentally unable to sympathise with the tastes or understand the temptations of the younger. But it was whispered at Court that the Chancellor had more than once used the gay and popular captain of cavalry for a cat's paw in pulling some very big chestnuts out of the fire, and that he would do the same again, if occasion arose. "Handsome Otto"—so known among his admirers—"The Chancellor's Jackal"—thus nicknamed by his enemies—would have found difficulty in keeping up appearances without the allowance granted by his brother. The ill-assorted pair were often in communication, and the Baroness liked to think that news fresh from Lynarberg must sooner or later be wafted across the water to Markstein. "Iron Heart" would hear of that which his iron hand was powerless to crush; and the old bear would be ready to devour himself in impotent fury.

Therefore she was not surprised, when the Emperor had been for two days at Lynarberg, and there were still three more of his visit to run, that an urgent letter should arrive for Captain von Markstein from the Chancellor.

Poor old Eberhard was wrestling with his enemy, gout, it appeared, and desired Otto's immediate pres-

ence. Such a summons could not be neglected; Otto's whole future depended on his brother's caprice, he hinted to the Baroness, in asking leave to desert her pleasant party for a few hours. And so she had sent the Chancellor her regards, regretting his indisposition; and Otto had been charged with a friendly message from the Emperor as well. When he had driven off in one of the Lynarberg carriages, promising to be back in time for dinner and a concert in the evening, the Baroness spent all her energies in getting up an impromptu riding party, which would afford Maximilian the chance of another *tête-à-tête* with Miss de Courcy.

Already many such had been arranged, apparently without giving rise to gossip; and if the flirtation (which was to disgust Maximilian with the Chancellor's matrimonial projects) did not progress with startling rapidity, it would not be the fault of an accommodating hostess.

"Otto has been bidden to use his eyes and ears at my house, and now he is called upon to hand in his report," she said to herself, when her guest had departed on his errand of compassion. But, for once at least in his career, the "Chancellor's Jackal" was wronged by unjust suspicions. He arrived at Markstein ignorant of his brother's motive in sending, though he did not for an instant believe it to be the one alleged.

The Chancellor was in his dark, octagonal study,

reading a budget of letters, when Otto was announced. If he were ill he did not show his suffering. His square face, with its beetling brows, its domelike forehead, was graven with no deeper lines, looked no more like a mask of carved mahogany, than usual.

"Sit down," he said gruffly, flinging aside an envelope postmarked Abruzzia. "I shall be ready to talk with you in a minute."

Otto took the least uncomfortable chair in the room—which was saying but little in its favour, as the newest article of furniture there had been made a hundred years before the world understood the luxury of lounging. Over the high mantel hung a silver shield, so brightly polished as to perform the office of a mirror. From where Otto sat, rigid and upright, he could see himself vignettèd in reflection. He admired his complexion, which was like a girl's; pointed the ends of his fair moustache with nervous cigarette-stained fingers, and wondered ruefully which of his pleasant peccadilloes had buzzed to Eberhard's ears. Half unconsciously his gaze turned from his own agreeable image to the outer page of the letter, held in the hand so veined that it resembled a surface of rock covered with the sprawling roots of old trees. Otto had just time to recognise the writing as that of the Crown Prince of Abruzzia, whom he had met, when a pair of keen eyes, cur-

tained with wrinkled lids, peered over the crested sheet of paper.

"It's coming," thought Otto. "What can the old curmudgeon have found out?"

But, to his surprise, the Chancellor's first words had no connection with him or his misdeeds.

"So Maximilian is amusing himself at Lynarberg?" the old man grunted.

Otto's face visibly brightened. He was not clever or full of resources, and he would always prefer discussing the affairs of others with this elder brother, rather than his own. "Oh, yes," he answered alertly. "His Majesty seems to be amusing himself uncommonly well. But you, Eberhard! Tell me of yourself. You sent for me. Your gout"—

"The devil run away with my gout!"

Otto started. "I devoutly wish he would, so he left you behind," he retorted—meaning exactly the opposite, as he usually did when talking with the Chancellor. "But"—

"Don't tell me you supposed I had sent for you that I might have the pleasure of your condolences?"

"No—o," laughed Otto. "I fancied there was another reason; but I am bound in common politeness to take your sincerity for granted until you undeceive me."

"Hang common politeness!" remarked the old bear—or as nearly in those words as the Rhaetian language permitted. "I sent for you to tell me what

mischief that witch-hawk Malvine von Lynar is hatching. You are on the spot. You should see everything. It will not be the worse for you if for once you have used those handsome eyes of yours to some advantage!"

Otto was genuinely astonished, as during the long drive he had been carefully bracing himself against a personal attack. He sat pulling his moustache, and was still trying to remember some striking incident with which to adorn his narrative, when the Chancellor began again.

"Has Maximilian been playing the fool at Lynarberg these last two days?"

"Fool is a strong word to use in connection with one's sovereign," smiled Otto, recovering his presence of mind. "But if by 'playing the fool' you mean falling in love, why, then, brother, I should say he had done little else during those two days you mention."

"Iron Heart" growled out a word which he would certainly not have uttered in his Royal master's presence, especially in the connection he suggested. "Give me a detailed account of what has been going on, from beginning to end," he commanded.

Otto looked thoughtful. This, then, explained the sudden summons. He was to be let off easily; but, his suspense relieved, he was not ready to be satisfied with purely negative blessings.

"It seems a little like telling tales out of school, doesn't it?" he gently objected.

"Schoolboys with empty pockets do that sometimes," sneered the Chancellor. "But perhaps your pockets are not empty—eh?"

"They are in a chronic state of emptiness!" groaned Otto.

"On the fifteenth day of October your quarterly allowance will be paid," said "Iron Heart." "I would increase the instalment by the amount of five thousand gulden, if you took pains to—humour any whim of mine."

"I am always delighted to please you," answered Otto, with alacrity. "It is only natural, living the monotonous life you do, when not busy with affairs of state, that you should care to hear what goes on in the world outside; and I will gladly do my best as a *raconteur*."

"Don't lie," said the Chancellor. "The habit is growing on you. You lie to yourself; presently you will *believe* yourself, and then all hope for your soul will be over. I want to know how far Maximilian has gone in his infatuation for this English girl. I am not afraid to speak plainly to you, and you can safely do the same with me. The woman von Lynar attempted to 'draw' me, as she would have expressed it, on the subject, and, by Heaven, I'm ashamed to say that she succeeded. She suggested an entanglement; I replied that Maximilian was not the man to

rouse a hornet-nest of gossip round the ears of a woman who had saved his life. No matter what his inclination might be, he would pay her no repeated visits at the Hohenburgerhof. This thrust the von Lynar parried—as if repeating a mere rumour—by remarking that she understood the girl was to stay at the house of some one among the Emperor's friends. I attached little importance to her chatter, believing it but a spiteful slap such as it is the tiger-cat's pleasure to deal those she hates. For once in her life, though, she has stolen a march upon me. The secret was only kept until too late for me to prevent the Emperor from fulfilling his engagement; then I don't doubt she was all eagerness that I should hear of her success."

"Do you think that, even if you had known sooner, you could have prevented the Emperor from going to Lynarberg?" inquired Otto, with thinly veiled incredulity. "If you are iron, he is steel."

"*I would* have prevented it," retorted the Chancellor. "I should have made no bones about the reason, for I have found that the only way with Maximilian is to tell him the truth, and fight it out—my experience against his obstinacy. If advice and warning had not sufficed to keep him from insulting the girl who is to be his wife, and injuring the reputation of the girl who never can be, I would have devised some other expedient. I am not a man easily thwarted."

"Nor is he," added Otto. "But, since you seem so determined to nip this blossom of love in the bud, it is not yet, we'll hope, too late for frost."

"I sent for you," said the Chancellor, brushing away a metaphor with an intolerant gesture, "to show me the exact spot on which to lay a finger."

"And I will try to deserve your confidence," gracefully responded the young officer. "Let me see where it will be best to begin. Well, as you know, it is simpler for the Emperor to see much of a woman he favours with his regard in a friend's house than at the Hohenburgerhof or any hotel in Rhaetia. This particular woman saved his life at the risk of her own; and it is so natural that he should wish to do her honour, that everybody takes his attitude for granted. Miss de Courcy and her mother, with several others of our party, had been for some days guests at Lynarberg before the Emperor came, and were ready to receive him. The girl is exceptionally beautiful, with a winning manner which appeals to women equally with men. Miss de Courcy had her friends and admirers in the house before the Emperor arrived; not one of the Baroness von Lynar's guests incline to put an evil construction on a little flirtation between her and Maximilian. Are you sure, Eberhard, that *you* are not taking too serious a view of the matter?"

"It cannot be regarded too seriously, in the circumstances. Princesses are women, and gossip is

hydra-headed. When the lady who has been allowed to understand that the Emperor only waits an opportunity of formally asking her for her hand hears—as she will hear—that he has seized this moment for his first *liaison* with another woman, neither she nor her family are likely to take the news kindly. She is German; on her father's side, second cousin to Kaiser Wilhelm. She is English; on her mother's side, distantly related to Queen Victoria. Both countries would have reason to resent a slight."

"The little affair must be hushed up," said Otto.

"It must be stopped," said the Chancellor.

"A—ach!" sighed the young brother. There was a world of meaning in the long-drawn breath, if the elder cared to read it.

At least, it roused him to a renewed sense of irritation. "Go on," he demanded. "Go on with your sorry tale."

"After all, when one comes to telling, there isn't much that can be put into words," Otto reflected aloud. "The Emperor's place at the table has naturally been beside the Baroness. For next neighbour she considerately gave him Miss de Courcy. It has been noticed that they have talked together as much as etiquette to the hostess allowed, during dinner. Then—the Emperor being an old friend of the von Lynars, accustomed to visiting at Lynarberg since he was a boy—he took it upon himself to show the English girl some of the beauties of the place. I

know that they went alone together to the rose-garden, which is famous, you remember; and Miss de Courcy came back with her hands full of flowers, doubtless gathered for her by Maximilian. On the evening of his arrival we were all out on the lake in small boats. The Emperor rowed Miss de Courcy to the Isle of Cupid, to see Thorwaldsen's statue, and lesser mortals joined them there. Yesterday, we had a picnic at the Seebachfall. The Emperor and Miss de Courcy are both remarkably good climbers, and reached the top long before the others. I was close behind, however, with our friend Malvine, at starting from the carriages, and I overheard some joke between them about a mountain, and a cow; the Emperor spoke of milking as a 'fine art,' and remarked that he had lately learned. I could hear no more; but it struck me that the two were on terms of *camaraderie*.

"Last night there were fireworks on the lake (perhaps you saw something of them from your windows?); the Emperor and Miss de Courcy watched them side by side—for everything was conducted quite unconventionally; you know he hates formality when visiting as much as he hates the lack of it in business. Afterwards, we had an impromptu cotillon, with several new figures invented by the Baroness; Maximilian and Miss de Courcy danced often together. This morning, we all visited the stables, the kennels, and the gardens; the Emperor walked

sometimes with the hostess, sometimes with Miss de Courcy. This brings us up to the moment of my departure; for the afternoon, I fancy Malvine had planned a ride."

"The girl is a fool and an adventuress!" pronounced the Chancellor. "She must know that nothing can come of such folly—except scandal."

Otto shrugged his stiffly padded shoulders. "A woman in love doesn't stop to count the cost!"

"So! you fancy her 'in love' with the Emperor?"

"With the man, rather than the Emperor, if I am a judge of character."

"Which you are not!" Old "Iron Heart" brusquely disposed of that suggestion. "The silliest woman could pull wool over your eyes, if she cared to take the trouble."

"This one does not care. She hardly knows that I exist."

"Humph!" The Chancellor peered over his gold-bowed spectacles at his young brother's handsome face. "That's a pity. You might have tried cutting Maximilian out! You would not be a bad match for an ambitious woman, with your good looks, our position, and my money."

"Your money?"

"I mean, if I chose to proclaim you my heir. I would do that, if you married to please me. Who are these de Courcys?"

"I have not had the curiosity to inquire into their antecedents," said Otto. "I only know that they are ladies, that they must be persons of consequence in their own country (or they could not have got letters to everybody here from Lady West), and that the girl is the handsomest creature living."

"The tiger-cat said that Lady West was responsible for the mother and daughter," soliloquised the Chancellor aloud. "But Rhaetia is a long cry from England. And letters are forged sometimes. I have known such things more than once in my experience. Fetch me a big red volume you will find on the third shelf of the bookcase, in the corner by the window that overlooks the lake. The book is 'Burke's Peerage'!"

Otto rose promptly to obey. He was rather thoughtful. His brother had put a completely new idea into his head.

Presently the red volume was discovered and laid open on the desk before the Chancellor, who slowly turned to the required page. As his eye fell upon a long line of de Courcys, his face changed, and the bristling brows drew together in a straight line. At least, these women did not appear to be adventures, in the ordinary acceptation of the term.

There they were; his square-tipped finger found and pressed down upon the printed names, with a dig that symbolised its disposition towards their claimants.

"The girl's mother is the widow of Sir Thomas, sixth Baron de Courcy," the Chancellor mumbled half aloud. "Son, Thomas Alfred—um—um—um—twelve years old; daughter, Gladys Irene Mary Katherine, twenty-eight. Hump! she's no chicken; she ought to have better sense!"

"Twenty-eight!" echoed Otto. "I'll be *hanged* if she's twenty-eight."

"She doesn't look it?"

"Not a day more than eighteen. Might be younger. I never was so surprised to learn a woman's age. By the way, I heard her telling von Lynar last night, *à propos* of our great Rhaetian victory in that month and year, that she was born in June, '79. If so, she would now have been twenty-one. It was difficult to believe her even as much. When she'd spoken, I remember, she gave a sudden start and blush, looking across the room at her mother, as though she were frightened. I suppose she hoped there was no copy of this great red book at Lynarberg."

"That thought might have been in her mind," grunted the Chancellor, "or"— He left his sentence unfinished, and sat, with prominent, unseeing eyes fixed in an owlish stare on the open page of Burke.

"Did you really mean what you said a few minutes ago about my marriage?" Otto ventured to attract his brother's attention. "Because if you did"—

"If I did—what then?"

"I might try—to please you in my choice of a wife."

"Be more explicit. You mean you would endeavor to show this Miss de Courcy that a bird in the hand is worth an Emperor in the bush—a bramble bush at that?"

"Yes, I would do my best. I have—er—some advantages."

"You have. And I was on the point of suggesting that you should make the most of them in her eyes, before—you brought me this book." The large forefinger tapped the page of de Courcys, while two grim lines of dogged purpose framed the Chancellor's long-lipped mouth.

"And now you've changed your mind?" There was a distinct note of disappointment in "handsome Otto's" voice.

"I don't say that. I merely say, 'Wait.' Make yourself as indispensable to the lady as you choose; that is, on your own responsibility; but don't pledge yourself, and don't count upon my promise or my money, until you hear again. By that time—well, we shall see what we shall see. Keep your hand in; but wait—wait."

"How long am I to wait? If the thing is to be done at all, it must be done soon. Meanwhile, the Emperor makes all the running."

The Chancellor looked up, his eyes introspective, his fist still covering the de Courcys.

"You are to wait until I have had answers to a couple of telegrams I shall send to-night."

CHAPTER IX

A WHITE NIGHT

"You meaner beauties of the night,
That poorly satisfy your eyes
More by your number than your light,
You common people of the skies—
What are you when the moon shall rise?"

THE first and second dressing-gongs had sounded at Schloss Lynarberg on the evening of the day after Otto's visit to his brother, and the Grand Duchess was beginning to wonder what detained her daughter, when ringed fingers tapped smartly at the door. "Come in!" she answered the familiar sound, and Sylvia appeared on the threshold, still in the tennis dress she had worn that afternoon. She stood for an instant without speaking, her face so radiantly beautiful that it seemed illumined by a light from within.

It had been on the tip of her mothers' tongue to scold the girl for her delay, since to be late was an almost unpardonable offence, with Royalty in the

house. But the words died, and others of a different sort came trooping to their place.

"Sylvia, what is it? You look— I hardly know *how* you look! But something has happened."

The Princess came slowly across the room, smiling with the air of one who walks in sleep. She hardly appeared to see the chair she took, but sat down as if by instinct, then rested her elbows on her knees, her chin nestling between her palms, like a pinky-white rose in its calyx.

"You may go, Josephine," said the Grand Duchess to her maid. "I will ring when I want you again."

The elaborate process of dressing her luxuriant grey hair had just been finished. The rest might wait until curiosity was satisfied.

But Sylvia sat still, dreaming. The Grand Duchess had to speak twice in a raised tone before she could command attention. "My child—have you anything to tell me?"

Sylvia roused herself. "Nothing, mother, really—except that I am the happiest girl on earth."

"Why—what has he said?"

"Not a word that anyone might not have listened to. But I *know*. He *does* care; and I think he will say something before we part."

"There is only one day more of his visit here, after to-night."

"One whole, long, beautiful day—together!"

"But after all, darling," ventured the Grand Duch-

ess, "what do you *expect*? If you were really only Miss de Courcy, marriage between you and the Emperor of Rhaetia would be out of the question. You've never been very communicative on this subject, but I wish I knew exactly what you hope for, what you will consider the—the keystone of the situation?"

"Only for him to tell me that he loves me," Sylvia confessed. "If I am right—if I have brought something new into his life—something which has shown him that he has a heart as well as a head—then there will come a moment when he can keep silent no longer, when he will have to say, 'I love you, and because we can be nothing to each other, day is turned into night for me.' Then—when that moment comes—the tide of my fortune will be at its flood. I shall tell him that I love him, too—and—*I shall tell him all the truth.*"

"You will tell him who you really are?"

"Yes; and why I have been masquerading. That it was because he had always been the one man on earth for me; because, when our marriage was suggested, I would win his love first as a woman, or I would live singly all my days."

"What if he should be angry and refuse to forgive you? You know, dear, we shall be in a curious position, at best, when the truth comes out, having made our acquaintances here under the name of de Courcy. Even Lady West, so dear a friend, so ro-

mantic a heart, was uncomfortable about the letters. She only eased her conscience because our real position in the world was much higher than the one we assumed; therefore, those to whom we were introduced would be but too pleased to know us in our own characters at the end. Yet Maximilian is a *man*, not a romantic woman; he has always borne a reputation for austerity, for being just before he was generous, and it may be that to one of his nature a mad prank like this of yours"—

"You think of him as he *was*, not as he *is*, if you fancy he would be hard with—a woman he loved," said Sylvia. "He will forgive me, mother; I have no fear of that. To-night, I have no fear of anything. He loves me—and I am Empress of the world."

"Many women would be satisfied with Rhaetia," was the practical thought in the mind of the Grand Duchess; but she would throw no more cold water upon her daughter's mood of exaltation. She kissed Sylvia on the forehead, breathed a few words of sympathy; then shook her head, sighing doubtfully, when the girl had gone to her own room to dress.

It sounded poetical, and as easy to arrange as turning a kaleidoscope to form a new combination, while Sylvia talked; but, when her happy face and brilliant eyes no longer illuminated the situation, the way seemed dark. To be sure, Sylvia had so far walked triumphantly along the high road to success;

but it was not always a good beginning which made a good ending, as the old Duke of Northminster had been wont to observe; and now the Grand Duchess of Eltzburg-Neuwald felt that her nerves must remain at high tension until matters were definitely settled, for better or for worse.

Sylvia had never in her life been lovelier than she was that night at dinner, and Otto von Markstein's admiration for her beauty had in it a new ingredient, which added a fascinating spice. He had regarded her until yesterday as a penniless connoisseur regards a masterpiece of statuary which it is impossible that he should dream of possessing. What we know is not for us, we are scarcely conscious of desiring, but the moment an element of hope enters in, we behold the object from a more personal point of view.

Otto looked also very often at the Emperor, contrasting his sovereign's appearance somewhat unfavourably with his own. Maximilian was thin and dark, with a grave cast of feature; while Otto's face had contrived to retain all the colour and beauty of youth. Alma Tadema would have wreathed him with vine leaves, given him a lute, draped him in a tiger skin, and set him down on a marble bench against a sapphire sky, when he would have appeared to far greater advantage than in the stiff uniform of a crack Rhaetian regiment. Maximilian, on the contrary, must always have been painted as a soldier, and it seemed to the young officer, since his grim

brother had put the thought into his head, that there could be no question as to the ultimate preference of a normal girl.

Miss de Courcy did not notice him at present, because the Emperor loomed large in the foreground; but Eberhard had evidently a plan in his head for removing that stately obstacle into the perspective.

Otto had not heard that Miss de Courcy was an heiress, therefore, even had there been no Emperor, he would have prostrated himself at the attractive shrine. But now the shrine was newly decked. Otto dwelt much in thought upon the Chancellor's apparently impulsive offer and the somewhat contradictory command which had, a little later, enjoined delay.

He had not, fortunately, been forbidden to preen himself under the eyes of the English beauty, and his desire now was, when the men should rejoin the ladies after dinner, to make his way at once to Miss de Courcy's side. But, as bad luck would have it, Baron von Lynar detained him for a few moments with the account of a marvellous remedy which might cure the Chancellor's gout; and when he escaped to look for Miss de Courcy in the great white drawing-room, she was nowhere to be seen. From the music-room adjoining, however, came sounds which drew him toward the door. He knew Miss de Courcy's touch on the piano; she was there, playing soft, low chords. Perhaps she was preparing to sing, as she had once or twice before, and would need

someone to turn the pages of her music. Otto was in the act of pushing aside the embroidered white velvet portière that curtained the door, when the hostess smilingly beckoned him away. "The Emperor has just asked Miss de Courcy to teach him an old-fashioned English or Scotch air (I fear I don't know the difference!) called 'Annie Laurie,'" she explained. "He was quite charmed when she sang it the other day; and I have been telling him that the music would exactly suit his voice. I think we had better not disturb them until the lesson is over. Tell me (I had hardly a moment to ask you last night), how did you *really* find the Chancellor?"

Chained to a forced allegiance, Otto mechanically answered the quickly following questions of the Baroness, ears and eyes both doing their secret best to penetrate the curtain of white and gold.

Everybody knew of the music lesson, and everybody chatted in tactful pretence of ignorance. Once, twice, and thrice the mezzo-soprano and the baritone sang conscientiously through the verses of "Annie Laurie," with occasional break-downs and new beginnings; then a few more desultory chords were struck on the piano; and at last silence reigned in the music-room. Were the two still there? If they conversed in low tones, it would not only be impracticable to catch what they said, but even to hear the murmur of their voices, in the drawing-room. To interrupt such a *tête-à-tête* was not to be thought of,

but Otto was turning over in his mind some less conspicuous, equally efficacious way of ending it, when there came a sudden diversion.

Lady de Courcy received a telegram, brought by mounted messenger from Salzbrück, and was so much affected thereby that she showed signs of swooning. Her plump, pleasant little face grew pale; she rose from her chair, tottering, and admitted, in answer to Baroness von Lynar's solicitous inquiries, that she had had bad news.

"Where is my daughter?" she asked. "I think, as I am rather upset by—by disquieting accounts of a dear friend, I had better go to my room. And I shall be so *much* obliged if—Mary can be sent to me as soon as she comes in."

Now was Otto's chance. While everyone gathered round Lady de Courcy, and smelling-salts were in requisition, he lifted the white portière and peeped through a small ante-chamber into the music-room. The Emperor and Miss de Courcy were no longer there.

Otto twisted his moustache; he usually twisted it on the right side when pleased; and he twisted it—a great deal more—on the left when he was displeased. He looked reproachfully round the room, and presently observed that one of the large windows leading to the Italian garden stood wide open.

The month of September was dying; but, though winter had begun in the Rhaetian mountains,

warmth and sunshine still lingered in the neighbourhood of Salzbrück. A balmy air, laden with sweet scents of the flowers which Baron von Lynar had imported from Italy, floated to Otto's nostrils. The lauguorous perfume suggested soft dalliance and confessions of love. The Emperor had taken Miss de Courcy into the garden; Otto knew that well enough; and if there had been a plentitude of trees, with broad trunks, behind which a man's figure might modestly conceal itself in the darkness, he would unobtrusively have followed. But he mentally reviewed the shrubbery, plant by plant, as he could recall it, and decided at last that the better part of valour for an officer and a gentleman lay in remaining within doors. He did not, however, return to the drawing-room, despite the concern for Lady de Courcy's health which had taken him in search of her daughter. Heavy curtains of olive-green velvet hung straight down over the windows of the music-room, and by neatly sandwiching oneself in a deep embrasure between the drapery and window-frame, one found a convenient niche for observing a limited quarter of the garden. The moon was rising over the lake, and long pale rays of level light were creeping up the paths, like the fingers of a blind man that touch gropingly the features of a beloved face.

Otto could not see very far, but if the Emperor and his companion returned by the way they had

taken, as they were almost sure to do, he would know whether they walked back to the house in the attitude of formal acquaintances or—lovers.

They had not been gone from the piano for many minutes, and they would not be likely to extend this duet—which so logically followed the music—much longer. One of the two, if not both, would have sense enough left to remember *les convenances*.

But the moments went on, and Otto, whose patent-leather pumps were rather tight, changed from one position to another, straining his eyes down the whitening alleys in vain.

Everything in the garden that was not white was grey as the dove's wing that night. Even the shadows were not black. And the sky was grey, with a changeful color of stars, like the shimmering light on a spangled fan that moves to and fro in the restless hand of a woman. White moths, forgetful that summer would come no more into their brief lives, fluttered out from the shadows like rose petals tossed by the south wind. On a trellis, a sisterhood of pale nun-roses hung their faces earthward, in *memento mori*.

It was a white night; a night of enchantment; a night for lovers.

Maximilian had only meant to take Sylvia out to see the moon rise over the water, turning the surface of jet to a sheet of steel; for there had been clouds

or rain on other nights, and he had said to himself that perhaps never again would they two stand alone together in the moonshine. He had meant to keep her to himself for five minutes, saying little, though it might be that he would think a great deal. He had meant that—no more; but they had walked down to the path which rimmed the cliff above the lake. And the moonlight lay on her gold hair and her fair face like a benediction. They did not look at one another, but out over the water, where the silver sheen cut the darkness like the sword Excalibur, rising from the lake.

Then came a sudden rustling in the grass by the side of the path, at their feet. It was some small winged thing of the night asking a lodging in a bell-shaped flower whose blue colour the moon had drunk. Maximilian bent to pluck the branch of blossoms, and at the same instant Sylvia stooped with a childlike impulse to “make the flower-bells ring.”

Their hands met on the stem as it broke, and Maximilian’s closed over hers.

The moment she desired had come; yet, womanlike, she wished it away—not gone for ever, but waiting still, just round the corner of the future.

“The flowers are yours,” she said, as if she thought it was in eagerness to obtain the spray that he had grasped her fingers.

“You are the flower I want—the flower of all the

world!" he suddenly answered. For the ice barriers that held back the torrent of which he had told her had melted beneath the sun of love long ago. In turn, they had been replaced by other barriers, well-nigh as strong—his convictions; his duty as a man at the head of a nation. But now, in a moment, these too had been swept away. "I love you better than the life you have saved," he spoke again. "I have loved you since that first hour, on the mountain; and every day since my love has grown, until I can fight against it no longer. Only say that you care for me a little—only say that."

"I do care," Sylvia whispered. She was very happy. She had prayed for this, lived for this. Yet she had pictured a different scene; she had seemed to hear broken words of sorrow and renunciation on his lips—a sorrow she could turn to joy. "I do care—so much, that—it is hard to think there is nothing for us but parting."

"If you care, then we shall not be parted," said Maximilian.

The Princess looked up at him in wonder, putting him from her, as he would have taken her in his arms. What did he mean? What was in his mind that, believing her to be Mary de Courcy, yet made it possible for him to speak as he was speaking now?

"I don't understand," she faltered. "What else is there for us? You are the Emperor of Rhaetia; I"—

"You are my wife, if you love me."

In the shock of her surprise she was helpless to resist him longer; and he held her tightly, passionately, his lips on her hair, as her face lay pressed against his heart. She could hear it beating, feel it throb under her cheek. *His wife?* How was it possible?

But he said the words again, "My darling—my wife!"

"You love me well enough—for that?" she breathed. Sylvia had not dared to dream of such a triumph as this. "But the law of your country? Oh, surely you have forgotten! We can only love each other, and say good-bye." She was ready to try him yet a little further.

"We will love each other, but, by Heaven, we shall not say good-bye—not after this hour. I could not lose you. As for the law, there is nothing in it which prevents my being your husband, you my wife."

"It is strange." Sylvia's breath came quickly. "I have thought—I have always believed—that the Empress of Rhaetia must be of Royal blood. I"—

"Ah, my darling, the Empress of Rhaetia I cannot make you. If you love me as well—only half as well as I love you, you will be satisfied with the empire of my heart."

Suddenly the warm throbbing blood in Sylvia's veins grew chill. It was as if a wind had blown up from the dark depths of the lake, to strike with an

icy chill upon her soul. A moment more and she would have told him the whole truth, worshipping him because he had been ready to break through all the traditions of his country for her sake. But now her passionate impulse of gratitude was frozen by that biting blast. If only it came from clouds of misunderstanding—if only the clouds would part, and give her back the full glory of a vanishing joy!

"The empire of your heart!" she echoed. "I should be richer than with all the treasures of the world, if that were mine. If you were the chamois-hunter I met on the mountain, I would love you as I love you now, and I would go with you to the ends of the earth, as your wife. But you are not the chamois-hunter; you are an Emperor. Had you told me only of a hopeless love, having nothing else to offer save that, and a promise not to forget, since your high destiny must stand between us, I could still have been happy. Yet you say more than that. You say something I cannot understand. What an Emperor offers a woman he honours, must be all or—nothing."

"I do offer you all," said Maximilian. "All myself, my life, the very soul of me—all that is my own to give. The rest belongs to Rhaetia."

"Then—what"—

"Do you not understand, my sweet, that I have asked you to be my wife? What can a man ask more?"

"Your wife—yet not the Empress. How can the two be separated?"

He tried to take her once more in his arms, but when he saw that she would stand aloof, he held his love in control and waited. He was certain that he need not wait long, for not only had he laid his heart at her feet, but, to do that, he pledged himself to a tremendous sacrifice. The step upon which he had decided, in the moment when passion for her had overcome all prudent scruples, would create dissension among his people, rouse fierce anger in the heart of one who had been his second father, incense England and Germany because of the young Princess whose name rumour had already coupled with his, and altogether raise a fierce storm about his ears. When she had reflected, when she fully understood, she would be his, now and for ever.

Very tenderly he took her hand and lifted it to his lips; then, when she did not snatch it from him—(because he was to have his chance of explanation)—he kept it between both his own, as he talked on.

"Dearest one," he said, "when I first knew that I loved you (as I had not known it was in my nature to love a woman) for your sake and my own, I would have avoided seeing you too often. This I tell you frankly. I did not see how, in honour, such a love could end except in sorrow for me—even for you, if it were possible that I could make you care. If you and Lady de Courcy had stayed at the hotel,

I think I could have been faithful to the resolve. But when Baroness von Lynar spoke to me of your coming here, at the time of my own visit, my heart leaped up. I said in my mind: 'At least I shall have the happiness of seeing her every day, for a time, without doing anything to darken her future. I shall have these days always to remember, when she has gone out of my life; and no harm will be done, except to myself.' Still, I only thought of parting, in the end—for that seemed inevitable. But not one night have I slept since I have been here at Lynarberg. My rooms open on a lawn at the other side of the house. Often I came out here in the darkness, when everyone else was sleeping; and sometimes I have stood on this very spot, where you and I stand together now—heart to heart for the first time, my darling—thinking whether, if you should care, there was any way to be found out of such difficulties as mine. At last a ray of light seemed to shine through the clouds. There was much to be overcome on both sides, and my mind was not yet clear, until I brought you here with me to-night. When I saw you by my side, the moonlight shining on your face, I caught at this way of binding our lives together. I knew that my life was worth nothing to me, unless it were to be shared with you."

"Yet you have not answered my question," said Sylvia.

"I am coming to that now. It was best that you

should hear first what has been in my heart and mind, these last days which have held more joy for me than all the years I have left behind. You know that men who have their place at the head of a great nation cannot think merely of themselves and those they love better than themselves. If they desire to snatch at personal happiness, they must take the only way open to them—that is all. Don't do me the injustice to believe that I would not be proud to show you to my subjects as their Empress; but, instead, I can only offer you what men of Royal blood have for hundreds of years offered women whom they respected as well as loved. You have heard of an arrangement which in your country is called a 'morganatic marriage'? That is what I propose."

With a low cry of pain—the bitter pain of disappointed love and wounded pride—Sylvia tore her hand from his.

"Never!" she exclaimed. "It is an insult."

"An insult? Then, even now I have not made you understand."

"I think that I understand very well—far too well," said Sylvia brokenly. The beautiful fairy structure of happiness that she had reared lay shattered—destroyed in the moment which should have seen its completion.

"I tell you that you do not understand, or you would not say—you would not *dare* to say, my love

—that I had insulted you. You would be honourably my wife in the sight of God and man.”

“Your wife!” and Syliva gave a hard little laugh which hurt more cruelly than her tears. “You have a strange idea of that word, which has always been sacred to me. I would be your wife, you say; I would give you all my love, all myself; you—would give me your left hand. And you know well that, at any moment, you would be free to marry another woman—(a woman you could make an Empress!)—as free as if I had no existence.”

“Legally I might be free,” he answered, “but I swear to you that I would never take advantage of such liberty.”

“To know you possessed it would be death to me. Oh, I tell you again, it *was* an insult to suggest a fate so miserable, so contemptible, for a woman you profess to love. How could you bear to break it to me? If only you had never spoken the hateful words; if you had left me the ideal I had formed of you—noble, glorious! But you are selfish, cruel—after all. If you had only said, ‘I love you, yet we must part, for Fate stands between,’ then I could—I could: but no, I can never tell you now what I *might* have answered if you had said that instead.”

Under the sharp fire of her reproaches he stood still, his lips tightly closed, his shoulders squared, as if he had bared his breast for the blow of a knife,

"By Heaven, it is you who are cruel!" he said at last. "How can I show you your injustice?"

"In no way. There is nothing more to say between us two, except—farewell."

"It shall not be farewell!"

"It shall—it must. Because—I wish it."

He had caught her dress as she turned to go; but now he released her. "You wish it? It is not true that you love me then?"

"It *was* true. Everything—everything in my whole life—is changed now. It would be better if I had never seen you. Good-bye."

She ran from him. One step he took as if to pursue her, but checked himself and followed her only with his eyes. In them there was more anger than yearning; for Maximilian was a proud man, and to have his love, and the sacrifice he would have made for love's sake, flung back in his face, came like an icy douche when the blood is at fever heat.

For love of this girl he had in a few days altered the habits of a lifetime. Pride, reserve, iron self-control, the wish not only to appear, but to be, a man above the frailties of common men; the desire to be admired almost as a god by his people—all, all, he had flung aside for her. He was too just not to realise that if one of his many Royal cousins, of younger branches than his, had contemplated throwing away for love half that he was now ready to cast to the winds, he would have regarded such weakness

with contempt. "He jests at scars who never felt a wound"; and until the Emperor had learned by his own most unlooked-for experience what love meant, what men will do for love while its sweet madness is upon them, he would have been utterly unable to sympathise with such passionate insanity as his own. A cousin inclined to act as he was bent on acting would once have found all the Emperor's influence, even force perhaps, brought forward to constrain him. Maximilian saw this change in himself, was astonished and shamed by it; yet would have persevered, recklessly trampling down every obstacle, if only Sylvia had seen things with his eyes.

She had accused him of insulting her, caring not at all that, even to make hermorganatically his wife, he must give great cause of offence to his Ministers and his people. He was expected to marry a woman of Royal rank, suitable to his own, and to give the country an heir. If Sylvia had accepted the position he offered, he could never have thought of another marriage. Not only would it be exceedingly difficult, in modern days, to find a Princess willing to tolerate such a rival, but it would be impossible for him so to desecrate the bond between himself and the woman he adored. This being so, there could be no direct heir to the throne. At his death his uncle, the Archduke Egon's son, would succeed; and, during his own reign, the popularity which was dear to him would be hopelessly forfeited. Rhaetians would

never forgive him for selfishly preferring his own private happiness to the good of the nation, or what they would consider its good; and they would have a right to their resentment, as they had a right to demand that he should marry. He could fancy how old Iron Heart von Markstein would present this view to him, with furious eloquence, temples that throbbed like the ticking of a watch, eyes netted with bloodshot veins. He could fancy, too, how with Sylvia's love and promise to uphold him, he could have stood against the storm, steadfast in his own indomitable will. But now, the will which had carried him through life in a triumphal progress had been powerless against that of a girl. She would have none of him. A woman whose face was her fortune, whose place in life reached hardly so high as the first steps of a throne, had refused—an Emperor.

Hardly yet could Maximilian believe the thing which had happened. He had spoken of doubting that he had won her love; and so he had doubted. But he had allowed himself very strongly to hope, since in the annals of history it had scarcely been known that an Emperor's suit should be despised. Besides, he had loved her so passionately, that it seemed she could not be cold. He hoped still that, when she had passed the night in reflecting, in thinking over the situation, perhaps taking counsel with that commonplace but sensible lady, her mother, she

might be ready, if approached for the second time, to change her mind.

For the first moment or two after the stinging rebuff he had suffered, Maximilian felt that he could not demean himself—having been so misjudged, so accused—to sue again. But, as he looked toward the house, and thought of Sylvia's sweetness, her beauty dimmed by grief—which he had caused—a great tenderness breathed its calm over the thwarted passion in his breast.

He would write a letter and send it to her room; or no, better give her a longer interval for repentance. To-morrow he would see her and show her all the depth of the love she had thrust aside. She could not withstand him forever; and now that he had burned his boats behind him, he would not go back. He could not give her up.

Sylvia had hurried blindly toward the house, and it was instinct rather than intention which led her to open the window of the music-room. Tears burned her eyelids, but they did not fall until she stood once more where she and Maximilian had so lately been together. There she had sat, at the piano, while he had bent over her, and she had been happy. How little she had guessed the humiliation that was to come! How could she bear it, and how could she live out the years of her life after this?

She paused in the embrasure of the window, her little fingers fiercely clutching the heavy curtain, as

she gazed through a mist at the picture called up by the open piano. Then a sob tore its way from her heart to her lips. "Cruel—cruel!" she stammered, half aloud. "What agony—what an insult! Ah, well, the dream's ended now."

Dashing the tears away to clear her vision, with desperation that must vent itself somehow, she flung the curtain aside and would have moved out into the room beyond, had not her gesture revealed the presence of a figure wrapped in the folds of velvet.

Someone else was there in the embrasure of the window—someone was hiding, and had been spying. Dark as it was behind the satin-lined velvet curtain, she must have seen a form pressed back into the shadow, had not her eyes been blinded by tears.

Now, her first impulse was for flight—anything to escape without recognition; but a second quick thought brought a change of mood. Whoever it was, had been watching, was already informed that Miss de Courcy had come in weeping, after a *tête-à-tête* with the Emperor. She must know who it was with whom she had to deal.

Sylvia had taken a step out into the room, as she flung back the curtain and touched the warm shape behind it. Wheeling suddenly round, she snatched the screen of velvet away and stood face to face with Captain von Markstein.

It was a crucial moment for him. Quailing under the lash of her glance, bereft of his presence of mind,

he caught at any chance for self-justification. The girl had come back by a different path from the one he had watched; she had rushed in like a whirlwind, without giving him the opportunity for escape which he had reasonably expected. If he stood waiting her condemnation, he was lost; he must step into the breach at whatever risk. No time to weigh words; the first which sprang to his tongue must be let loose.

"Don't think evil of me, Miss de Courcy!" he stammered, still groping for some excuse, in the cotton-wool which seemed to stuff his brains.

"I do not think at all." She held her head proudly; her eyes accused him and belied her words. With a swift step, she would have passed him, and he would have done well to let her go; but he had caught a whisper of inspiration from his evil genius. To turn the shame of this defeat to victory, to pose as hero instead of spy—this was an ending to the game worth the throw of all his dice. So seemed to say something in his ear, and drunk with vanity he flung himself before her.

"I *beg* of you to think," he cried. "I will not be misjudged. No man could stand still under the look in your eyes and not defend himself, if he were innocent. Your face says 'spy.'"

"You have read your own meaning there! Pray let me go."

"One moment first. You shall listen. I confess

I knew you were in the garden with—one whom we need not name. To break in upon such a *tête-à-tête*, for a man of my inferior rank, would be almost a crime, yet I would have committed that crime—to save you. You are so innocent, so beautiful—I feared for you; I suspected—what I know now from your words has happened. I would have saved you this pain, if I could—but I was too late, only in time to see you coming in, to hear—against my will—your exclamation. I waited to say that I can at least avenge you. I am at your service—your knight, as in days of old. Tell me what you would have me do, and I will do it.”

If Sylvia’s eyes had been daggers, he would have fallen dead at her feet. For an instant she looked at him in silence. Then—“I would have you leave me, never to dare come into my presence again,” she said. “And now I choose to pass.”

Mechanically he gave way, and she swept by with lifted head and the proud bearing of an offended queen.

Otto was stricken dumb. Dully he watched her move across the long room to the door which led out into a corridor, not through the drawing-room. He saw the changing lights and shadows on her satin dress, as she passed under the chandelier; he saw the reflection of its whiteness mirrored on the polished floor. She was beautiful to him no longer; for he hated her because of his mistake, and because she

had read his mind. She had seen the truth there, under his falsehoods, as he saw the reflection on the surface of shining oak. She knew that he was a moral coward, and that, had she accepted his fantastic offer, he would never have ventured to enter the lists as her knight against the Emperor. Fortunately, she had undoubtedly quarreled with Maximilian, and would not carry tales. It would indeed be a sorry day for Otto if reconciliation ever came; and if by some strange chance of the future it seemed imminent, he must not let it come.

"Heavens! does she fancy herself an Empress?" he sneered beneath his breath. "Before Eberhard has finished with her, she may not even be what she is now!"

His ears still burned as if she had struck them. He could not return to the drawing-room until they had cooled. There was no hope for him now with Mary de Courcy, whatever the Chancellor's mysterious telegrams might contain, but he was too furious to mourn over lost hopes, lost opportunities. Eberhard was evidently trying to learn something to the girl's disadvantage, and Otto's aid was only to have been bought in case of failure. Now, he was in a mood to offer it for nothing, and it occurred to him that he would ride over to Schloss Markstein early in the morning.

CHAPTER X

"THE EMPEROR WILL UNDERSTAND"

It was for the refuge of isolation that Sylvia fled to her own room. Between her bedchamber and the Grand Duchess's was a boudoir, which they shared; and it was the door of this intermediate room that gave admittance, from the corridor outside, to both. To the girl's surprise, as she entered—her one comfort the assurance of being undisturbed—her mother looked reproachfully up from a pile of silken cushions on the sofa. Josephine was rubbing her hands, and the air was pervaded with the pungent fragrance of sal volatile.

"I thought you were *never* coming!" ejaculated the Grand Duchess. If she noticed her daughter's pallor, she believed it due to anxiety about herself.

Sylvia stared, half dazed, unable yet to separate her mind from her own private misfortunes. "Never coming!" she echoed mechanically. "Why—are you ill—did you expect me?"

"I nearly fainted downstairs," returned the Grand

Duchess, "and it is entirely your fault. You ought not to have exposed me, at my age, to such terrible shocks. Josephine, you can go."

Sylvia grew cold as ice. She could think of but one explanation. Otto von Markstein had not been the only spy. Somehow, news of what had happened in the garden had reached the Grand Duchess, reducing her to this extremity. The Princess was scarcely conscious of hearing the door close after the banished Josephine, yet instinctively she waited for the click of the latch. "How did you know?" she asked dully.

"How did I know? I had a telegram. 'A most alarming, disconcerting telegram. The question is, how did *you* know that I knew, and how did you—did I—oh, I am so distressed, I hardly know *anything!*'"

The word "telegram" showed Sylvia that somehow, somewhere, misunderstanding had entered in. Her mother's fretful complaints pried among her nerves like hot wires; yet could she have believed it, the new pain was the best of counter-irritants.

"Are you suffering still, dear?" she questioned, carefully controlling her voice. With the Grand Duchess, it was always best to go back to the beginning, not to attempt picking up loose ends in the middle; thus, one sooner reached the end of a tangle.

"Yes, I am ill, very ill *indeed*. Did no one tell you, no one send you to me, as I asked?"

"I have seen no one since I left you—no one, that is, who could tell me anything. Won't *you* tell me—now?"

The Grand Duchess pointed a plump, dimpled forefinger toward a sixteenth-century writing-table. "The telegram's there, if you care to see it," she remarked crossly. She did not often lose her temper, or at least, not for long; but she had really borne a great deal of late; and, as she had observed, it was all Sylvia's fault; therefore it was Sylvia's turn to suffer now.

On the desk lay a crumpled piece of paper. Sylvia picked it up and read, written in English: "Somebody making inquiries here about de Courcys. Beg to advise you immediately to explain all, or leave present place of residence, avoid almost certain unpleasantness. Have just heard of complications.—WEST."

"Well, what do you think of *that*?" irritably demanded the Duchess, vexed at Sylvia's calmness. "Isn't that enough to make *anyone* faint? That, I, I, a woman in my position—should be forced to appear a—er—an *adventuress*! If it were not so dreadful, it would be absurd. You might show a *little* feeling, since it is for you that I have done it all."

"I have plenty of feeling, mother," said Sylvia. "Only I—seem somehow rather stunned just now. I suppose Lady West means that busybodies have been trying to find out things about the de Courcys.

We have provided for most contingencies, but we had not thought of spies—*till to-night*."

"I allowed myself to be led by you," declared the Grand Duchess, "when I ought to have controlled you, as my child. I should never have allowed myself to be placed in such an ignominious plight. But here I am, in it; and here you are also—which is quite as bad, if not worse. You have brought us into this trouble, Sylvia; the least you can do is to get us out. And, after all"—brightening a little—"there is, thank goodness, a way to do that. It ought not to be so *very* difficult."

"What way—do you mean?"

"I wonder you ask—since there is only one. Stop this foolish child's-game that you have deluded me into playing; explain everything to the Emperor and to Baroness von Lynar, and be prepared to turn the tables on our enemy—whoever that may be. Your dear father always said that I had a head for emergencies, once I could get the upper hand of my nerves, and I hope—I *think*, he was right."

"But what you propose is impossible, mother."

Sylvia spoke in a low, constrained voice, and the Grand Duchess, rising from among her pillows, suddenly observed for the first time that there was something strange in the girl's manner and appearance. She admired her daughter, as a bewildered hen-mother might admire the beautiful, incomprehensible ball of golden fluff that sails calmly away beyond

her control in a terrifying expanse of water, while she herself can only cluck protest from the bank. The Grand Duchess had almost invariably yielded her will to Sylvia's in the end; but she told herself that she had done so once too often, and the weaknesses of her past buttressed her obstinacy in the present.

"I tell you it isn't impossible," she exclaimed. "It can't be impossible, when it's the only way left to save our dignity. We mustn't let our enemies have the first move. You meant to make a sort of dramatic revelation, sooner or later. Well, it must be sooner, that is all, my dear."

"Ah, I meant—I meant!" echoed Sylvia, the sound of a sob in her voice. "Nothing has happened as I meant, mother. You were right; I was wrong. We ought never to have come to Rhaetia."

The Grand Duchess's heart gave a thump. If Sylvia were thus ready to admit herself in the wrong, without a struggle, then matters must indeed have reached an alarming pass. Not a jest; not a single flippancy! The poor lady was seriously distressed.

"Not—come—to—Rhaetia?" she repeated as incredulously as if she had not herself lately made the same assertion. "Why—why—what"—

"I scarcely know how to tell you," said Sylvia, with lowered lashes. "But I suppose I must."

"Of course you must. I thought you looked upset. You were with *him*—in the music-room. Yes;

I remember. Did you try to explain, and he—was it as I feared, only this evening before dinner? wouldn't he forgive the decep——"

"He knows nothing about it."

"Well, what then? Don't keep me in suspense. I've had enough to try me without that." And the Grand Duchess raised a little jewelled vinaigrette to her nostrils. It had been given her by Queen Victoria, and was particularly supporting in a time of trial.

Sylvia's lips were so dry that she found difficulty in articulating. There were some things it was extremely embarrassing to tell one's mother. "We—went out into the garden—to see the moon—or something," she managed to begin. "He asked me to be—his wife. Oh—wait, wait, please! *Don't* say anything yet! I didn't know what to make of it, and—he had to explain. He put it as inoffensively as he could, but—oh! mother, I—I was only good enough to be his *morganatic* wife!"

The storm had burst at last. There had always been mental and temperamental barriers between the parent and child; but, after all, a mother is a mother; and nothing better has ever been invented yet. Sylvia fell on her knees by the sofa, and, burying her head in her mother's lap, sobbed as if parting with her youth.

The Grand Duchess thought of the last time when the girl had so knelt beside her, the bright hair under

her caressing hand; and the contrast between *then* and *now* brought motherly tears to her eyes. That time had been in the dear old river garden at Richmond, when Sylvia had coaxed away her promise to help forward this very scheme—this disastrous, miserable, *mad* scheme. Poor little Sylvia, so young, so inexperienced, so thoroughly girlish for all her naughty obstinacy and recklessness, sweet and loving and impulsive! The child had been so full of hope then; why, only a few hours ago, she had said she was the happiest creature on earth!

All the Grand Duchess's resentment melted away as she rocked the sobbing girl in the comfortable cradle of her arms, murmuring and crying over her—the hen-mother, over the golden duckling that had ventured into water too rough and treacherous.

"There, there, dear," she crooned. "It isn't so very dreadful; not half as bad as you made me think. I'm sure he *meant* well. It showed at anyrate that he loved you. Just at first, it came as rather a *shock*, of course; knowing who we *are*; but if you had really been Miss de Courcy, I suppose—I suppose it would have been a great *compliment*."

"I call it an insult; I called it so to him," gasped Sylvia in the midst of sobs.

"Oh dear me, not as bad as that—not at all! Many ladies of very high standing have been in such positions, and everyone has thoroughly respected them. Though, of course, such a thing would never

do for *you*, you must reflect that Maximilian couldn't *know* that."

"He ought to have known—known that I would never consent. That no woman with English blood in her veins would ever consent. It *was* an insult. It has shown how poor was his estimate of me. It was—it was! It has broken my heart. It has killed me. Oh, mother, it's all at an end—everything I lived for. I can never bear to see him after this."

"You'll feel differently to-morrow, pet," purred the Grand Duchess, smoothing the tumbled waves of yellow hair.

"Never!"

"You are too young fully to understand the etiquette of Courts. Remember, *his* point of view is different from yours."

"That is the reason I am so miserable. His point of view is hateful. I want to go away—to go away at once."

Her earnest emphasis forced conviction. She really meant it. This was no girlish whim, to be repented in a few hours, a lovers' quarrel to be made up to-morrow. The Grand Duchess's kindly face, already deeply clouded, was utterly obscured in gloom. The small features seemed lost behind their expression of distress.

"But surely you will tell him the truth, or let *me*, and give him a chance to—to speak again? Now, more than ever——"

"What good would it do? Everything is spoiled. Of course, if he knew I were Sylvia of Eltzburg-Neuwald, he would be sorry for what had happened, even if he thought I had brought it all on myself. But that would be too late to mend anything. Don't you see, don't you understand, that I valued his love because it was given to me, just *me*, not the Princess? If he said, 'Now that I know you are Sylvia, I can have the pleasure of offering my *right*, instead of my *left* hand to you, as my wife, and everything can be very pleasant and regular,' I should not care for that at all? No, we must go home, mother; and the Emperor Maximilian of Rhaetia must be informed that Sylvia of Eltzburg-Neuwald has decided not to marry. That will be our one revenge—the only one we can have—that little slap in the face to His Imperial Majesty; so pitiful a slap, since he will never know that Princess Sylvia who won't marry him, and Miss de Courcy who can't, are one and the same. But, mother, I did love him—I did love him so!"

"Then forget and forgive—and be happy, while you can."

"I can't. I've just told you why. Oh, do let us make our plans to get out of this hateful house as soon as possible."

The Grand Duchess resigned herself to the inevitable, and only a deep sigh told the tale of the effort resignation cost her. For once she was expected to

take the initiative, and the responsibility was a stimulant; this one consolation was left her.

"Well," she said, after a moment's abstruse reflection, "the telegram will give us an excuse. I was so overcome on reading it that I had to sit down again after getting suddenly up from my chair and borrow the Baroness's smelling-salts—poor, inadequate Rhaetian stuff. Everyone was alarmed, and I explained, without going into particulars, that I had received most *disturbing* news from England. Directly I felt more like myself, I came upstairs, requesting that you should be sent to me, when you returned—though you were not to be specially *called*. I begged the Baroness not to be anxious, but she said that, before she went to bed, I really must allow her to stop at the door and inquire how I was. We might say to her that the telegram had compelled our immediate return to England."

"Listen," whispered Sylvia. "There's someone at the door now."

She sprang to her feet, and, with the marvellous facility for meeting a conventional emergency possessed by all women in palace or tenement, between the time of rising and walking to the door, she had conquered the disorder of her countenance. Her hair was smoothed back into perfection; the laces on her dress had fallen into their old graceful lines; her face, though flushed, would show no signs of tears in the softly shaded light.

Sylvia herself opened the door and gracefully besought the inquiring Baroness to come in. Immediately after the scene in the garden, she could not have done this so quietly; but she had cried her heart out now, and reviled the offender to a sympathetic audience, thus facilitating the return of self-control. Even if Baroness von Lynar guessed that she had been weeping, it would only be put down to the score of that mysterious "bad news."

"How good of you!" breathed the Grand Duchess, with a less coherent undertone of appreciation from Sylvia. "Oh yes, thank you, *so* much better; quite well again, though still very anxious. *Somebody* must have been kind enough to tell dear Mary, for here she is, you see; and she and I have been talking matters over. We are quite *desolated* at breaking our delightful visit suddenly short, but unluckily it can't be helped. This *unfortunate* news from home! We must positively not lose an hour in returning."

Baroness von Lynar was genuinely disconcerted, though perhaps her guests would scarcely have been flattered had they divined the true cause of her intense desire to detain them. Miss de Courcy had been the bright particular star of the house party at Lynarberg, as the mistress of the castle delicately declared, and it was grievous that the sky must be robbed of its most brilliant ornament. But it was far more grievous that Maximilan should be annoyed,

and the Baroness's own pretty, secret little scheme probably be brought to confusion.

"It is too cruel!" she exclaimed, with unwonted sincerity. "What shall we do without you? We could better have spared any others among our guests. Our poor party will be hopelessly shattered by your loss. Could you not wire home that you are coming at your earliest convenience, dear Lady de Courcy, and stay with us at least until the day after to-morrow, when the Emperor's visit will be over?"

"Alas! I am afraid we could not do even that," regretted the Grand Duchess, her eyes on Sylvia's face. "It is necessary that we reach England as soon as possible. We were thinking of quite an early train to-morrow. You will forgive us, I know, dear Baroness von Lynar; but we have both been so upset by these sad tidings that we shall hardly be equal to facing any of our kind friends here again. These things are so unnerving, you know—and I give way easily of late years. As a great favour to us both, pray mention to *no* one that we are going, until we have actually gone. If you would allow us to leave our adieux to be said by you, we would beg you for a carriage after an early cup of coffee in our rooms; then we could pick up Miss Collinson and the luggage we left at the Hohenburgerhof, and catch the Orient express from Salzbrück to Paris."

The Baroness was aghast at her own defeat and her powerlessness to retrieve it. For once she failed

in tact. "But the Emperor?" she exclaimed. "He will be deeply hurt if he is denied the sad privilege of bidding you farewell."

The Grand Duchess hesitated, and Sylvia entered the conversational lists for the first time. "The Emperor will understand," she said quietly; "I said good-bye to him—for us both—to-night."

CHAPTER XI

THE LAST OF THE MAGIC CITRONS

BREAKFAST at Schloss Lynarberg was an informal meal. Those who were socially inclined at that hour appeared; those who loved not their kind until later in the day, broke their fast in the safe seclusion of their own apartments.

Maximilian had shown himself at the breakfast-table every morning since the beginning of his visit, and it had been Sylvia's usual custom also to be present. But Lady de Courcy invariably kept her room till later, and on one occasion the daughter had borne her mother company. On the morning after the misunderstanding in the garden, therefore, the Emperor was only disappointed, not surprised, to find that Sylvia did not come.

He had spent another wakeful night, but he could not bring himself to believe that Sylvia would never listen to him, that she would not yet be brought to see the future through his eyes.

It was his last whole day at Lynarberg, but, by

his special request, no regular programme of entertainment had been made. As breakfast progressed, Maximilian turned over in his mind plan after plan for another meeting with Sylvia, and hoped that, by this time, she would be as ready to receive his overtures as he to make them. He longed to write her a letter, imploring her to come to him; but feared, unless he could make his first appeal in person, that he might defeat his own object. It would be better, perhaps, to wait until she was actually in his presence, then carry her away from the eyes of others, by some bold stroke.

But she did not come, even when for half an hour they had all been strolling in the quaint pleasaunce, where the white peacocks spread their jewelled tails and shrilly disputed for possession of the sundial. The Baroness, who walked by the Emperor's side, and appeared singularly *distracte*, despite her constant efforts at repartee, at length proposed that they should row out again to Cupid's Isle. The morning was so fine, and the red October lilies which had been in bud there the other day ought to be open by now.

Maximilian approved the idea. "Shall you not send for Miss de Courcy?" he inquired, with a simulated carelessness at which Malvine could have laughed—had she not been more inclined to weep. "I think I remember hearing her say that there are

no such lilies in England, and that she would like to see them in fuller bloom."

The Baroness glanced quickly behind her. None of the others were within earshot, if she spoke in a low voice. "Oh, but you have forgotten, have you not, your Majesty? Miss de Courcy and her mother have already gone."

He turned so white, under the coat of brown the mountains had given, that Malvine was startled. She had believed Sylvia—more or less—supposing until now that the Emperor had actually been made aware of the intended flitting. There had been an affecting parting perhaps, she had told herself; and for his sake she had refrained from mentioning the de Courcys at breakfast in the presence of the other guests. For the last few moments she had been impatiently waiting for Maximilian to introduce the subject, hoping that he might be confidentially inclined; but it was a genuine surprise to discover that he had really been kept in ignorance. Malvine was very angry with Sylvia's deception; for, had she dreamed, in time, that the Emperor did not know the girl was going, she would slyly have given him a chance to follow, if he chose. Now, it was in all probability already too late for this.

"Where have they gone?" he asked—the only sign of feeling in the pallor of his face and the fire in his eyes.

"To Salzbrück, your Majesty."

"Oh, is that all? Then they are coming back; or, at least, they are not leaving Rhaetia?"

"I am afraid that they are leaving."

"When?"

"To-day, by the Orient express. I did all I could to keep them. But some bad news reached Lady de Courcy last night, in a telegram from England. They both insisted that they must go home at once, begging as a favour, since they felt unequal to farewells, that no one should know until they were gone—except, of course, your Majesty. Miss de Courcy said that—you knew; that you would understand."

The Emperor was silent for a moment, and Malvine would have glanced up at him from under her artificially darkened lashes, if she had dared. But she did not dare. Still, she was beginning to hope that the feeling she would fain have seen implanted in his heart had already taken root so deeply that it would not soon perish. In that case, after all, she would have thwarted the Chancellor—for a time at least; since a man, even when he is an Emperor, cannot readily be persuaded to marry one woman when his heart is aching with love for another.

When Maximilian did speak, his voice was very quiet—aggravatingly quiet, thought Malvine—but his eyes were even brighter than before. It was a dangerous, rather than a pleasant brightness; and Malvine, who had no cause to fear its menace for herself, wondered what the light betokened.

"Miss de Courcy did speak of leaving earlier than she had expected," he said. "But if she gave me reason to suppose it would be so soon, I certainly did not understand. I am sorry that there was bad news from England."

So also was Malvine; but she began now to ask herself if the news alone had sufficed to snatch her guests so suddenly away.

"Is it long since they left Lynarberg?" the Emperor added.

"They went at about half-past seven this morning, before anyone was up, except my husband and myself and the servants. By half-past eight they would have joined their companion, who remained at the Hohenburgerhof. Then there would have been a little packing to oversee, perhaps, and—the Orient express is due in Salzbrück, I think, at precisely one o'clock. It is now"—she glanced half apologetically at the watch in her bracelet—"it is now five minutes past twelve, so that in less than an hour the prettiest woman who ever came to Salzbrück will have vanished again." And, as Malvine von Lynar spoke, she sighed.

The blood rushed to Maximilian's face. He had a choice between two evils. If he pursued and overtook the girl, he might persuade her to hear reason; at least, she would see that he was no laggard in love. But to follow, to cut short the visit at Lynarberg, which should not have ended till next day,

would be virtually to take the world into his secret. A month ago such a question (when yielding to inclination meant a humbling of his pride as man and Emperor) would have decided itself. But within these last days Maximilian had learned that his valued strength of will in the past had been ruled, more or less, by the limitations of his desire. Now, he wanted to do a certain thing more than he had ever wanted anything in the whole course of his life, and the question was mentally settled as quickly as it would have been a month ago; the only difference being that it was settled in the opposite way.

"Baroness von Lynar, you and I are old friends," he said hastily.

"I value your friendship above all things, your Majesty, and would keep it at any cost."

"Then keep something else for me as well; a secret—though it may not be a secret long. You have seen me with Miss de Courcy. And you have guessed something, perhaps?"

"Women are ever quick to jump at romantic conclusions. But——"

"I am answered. A moment has come when I must choose between speaking frankly with you or leaving you to suspect what you will. I choose frankness. There's nearly an hour yet before the Orient express leaves Salzbrück, and you say Miss de Courcy is going with it. I can't let her go with-

out seeing her again. I want—but you know what I want.”

“You want your horse and your aide-de-camp’s horse saddled; you want to ride away now, at once, to catch the train before it leaves the station; and you want me to give some plausible reason which will account to everyone for your sudden departure. Anything, so that it is not connected with Miss de Courcy. Am I right?”

“Absolutely. If I get off in a quarter of an hour, I can just do it.”

“I will slip into the house, your Majesty, and send a servant at once to the stables. Captain von Löwenstein shall be summoned, and you can be on the road in ten minutes.

“I’ll go with you to the house, my friend.”

“Everybody shall be given to understand that you are called away from Lynarberg on pressing business, but that you expect to return in the afternoon. If you find it best *not* to come, send a wire saying that you are detained. All will be deeply disappointed; but no one will guess the truth, and more than that, no one will talk.”

By this time they were at the house steps. Malvine flew in to give orders, while Maximilian waited, his eyes on his watch. Four minutes later Captain von Löwenstein, the Emperor’s aide-de-camp (who had been in the act of proposing to pretty Baroness Maria Vedula), stood ready to receive his master’s

orders. Ten minutes more, and the two soldierly figures rode at a gallop out from the park gates at Lynarberg.

"We're going to the station, to catch the Orient express, von Löwenstein," said Maximilian. "I have—promised myself to say good-bye to some friends."

"Were you aware, your Majesty," asked the aide-de-camp, "that the time-table has just been changed for the autumn? The Orient express leaves ten minutes earlier than it has during the summer."

The Emperor used a strong word. "Are you certain, von Löwenstein?"

"Certain, your Majesty. I looked out the time for my sister, who goes to Paris next week. The new table only came into use yesterday."

"I'll kill my horse under me rather than lose the train," said the Emperor. And he loved Arabian Selim well, as von Löwenstein knew.

"We've just a chance of doing it without that, your Majesty. It's scarcely five miles now."

They rode as if their lives were at stake. And they rode without a word. At last they came to the suburbs, then into the outskirts of the town. In the distance, a church clock chimed the quarter before one. The two looked at each other. Five minutes, and the station was but a mile away. They would do the trick yet!

The upright line between Maximilian's black

brows relaxed. He threw up his head and smiled like a boy, looking—Löwenstein thought—as he looked when they camped in the Weisshorn and shot chamois.

“You shall have something to make you remember to-day, if all goes well,” he said to the aide-de-camp; then drew in his breath sharply, for Selim had stumbled. A dozen yards away, on the dusty white of the road, lay a black crescent—Selim’s shoe.

Quick as light, Maximilian sprang off. “Give me your mare, von Löwenstein,” he said. “I must go on alone.”

So they made the change, and the younger man watched his master disappear in a cloud of dust, as he, on Selim’s back, followed slowly after. And he wished that he knew whether the little Baroness Marie would have said yes or no, and whether the Emperor’s business with the Orient express were business of state or love.

Kohinoor had not the staying power of Selim; she was good for a spurt of speed; but she knew when she had had enough, and no mortal power could persuade her otherwise, when she thought that such a time had arrived. People stared to see a man urging a smoking thoroughbred through the broad Bahnhofstrasse in Salzbrück, at a speed forbidden within the town limits, and stared still more at beholding a gendarme leap forward with a warning shout, then blunder back again, speechless, with a

crimson face under his shining helmet. Horse and man dashed by so madly that few could tell whether the rider were a person of importance at the Court, or a stranger. But a soldier of cavalry swaggering away from barracks with a friend, said, "Do you know who that is?"

"By the way he rides I should say it was his Satanic Majesty," declared the other, a country recruit.

"You're not far wrong maybe; but, all the same, it is His Majesty our Emperor," replied the first.

The hands of the big white clock-face looking down from the Bahnhof tower pointed at five minutes to one, when Maximilian reined up the mare before the main entrance, and bade a *dienstmann* hold his horse, as if he had been a common townsman. Something the fellow shouted about being there to carry luggage, not to hold horses (for he did not know the Emperor by sight), but Maximilian waited neither to hear nor argue. He sprang up the broad stone stairway, three steps at a time.

"Has the Orient express gone yet?" he demanded of the man at the door of the departure platform.

"Five minutes ago," returned the official, not troubling to look up.

An unreasoning fury against fate raged in Maximilian's breast. He ruled this country, yet everything in it seemed to combine in a plot to thwart his dearest desire. For a moment he felt as if he had come up against a blank wall and saw no present

way of getting round it; but that was only for an instant, since the Emperor was not a man of slow decisions. His first step was to inquire what was the earliest stop made by the Orient express. In three hours, he learned, it would reach Wandeck, the last station on the Rhaetian side of the frontier. What was the next train, then, leaving Salzbrück for Wandeck? In twenty minutes, a *personen zug* would go out. After that, there would be no other train for two hours. The *personen zug* would arrive at Wandeck only fifty minutes earlier than the *schnellzug* following so much later, therefore most people preferred to wait. But Maximilian, having gathered this intelligence, was not of the majority; he chose the fifty minutes in Wandeck, for even if he courted publicity by engaging a special, so long a time must pass before it could be ready that he would gain no advantage.

Before taking his ticket, however, he telephoned the Hohenburgerhof, to satisfy himself beyond doubt that the de Courceys had actually gone. There was a delay of a few minutes before the answer came; but presently he was informed that the ladies had left the hotel. This decided his plan of action once for all, and the short remaining interval before the departure of the slow train he snatched for writing out two telegrams, one to Baroness von Lynar, the other to a person more important.

The first words of the latter ran fluently. "Miss

de Courcy, Orient express, care of the stationmaster, Wandeck," he wrote. "I beg that you will leave the train here and wait for me. I am following, and will arrive in Wandeck three hours after you. I will look for you and hope to find you at the Maximilianhof."

So far it was very simple. He had expressed his wish and signified his intention, which would have been enough if Miss de Courcy were a loyal subject of his own. But unfortunately she had exhibited no signs of subjection; and the question arose, would she grant the most ardently expressed request, unless he could offer some new inducement? On reflection, he was ruefully compelled to admit that she probably would not. Yet what had he to urge that he had not urged last night? What could he say, at this eleventh hour, which would keep her from passing for ever beyond his dominions and beyond hope of recall?

As he stood, pen in hand (each moment of hesitation at the risk of missing his chosen train), a curious memory came to him. He recalled a fairy tale which had been a favourite of his childhood, and had helped to form his resolve that, when *he* grew to manhood, he would never miss an opportunity through vacillation. The story had for its hero a prince who went abroad to seek his fortune, and received from one of the Fates three magic citrons which he was told to cut by the side of a fountain,

Obeying, from the first citron sprang a beautiful maiden, who demanded a drink of water; and while the prince gazed in amazement, vanished. With the second citron, it was the same; and the third maiden would have been irrevocably lost also, had not the youth recovered his presence of mind at the last moment.

Now, Maximilian said to himself, his knife was on the rind of the last citron. Let him think well before he cut, that his one remaining chance of happiness might not vanish like the two fairy maidens.

He had believed it impossible for a man to love a woman more than he loved Mary de Courcy; but, knowing that he was on the point of losing her, he found his love a thousandfold greater than he had known. The sacrifice he had been ready to make had loomed large in his eyes; now, it was nothing, since it had not sufficed to win or keep her. What, then, could he do? What other resource had he left?

Suddenly it seemed that a great light shone before his eyes, like a meteor bursting, and a voice whispered in his ear, a thought that ran like fire through his veins.

Why not? he asked of his heart. Who was bold enough to say "no" to the Emperor's "yes"? Had he not proved more than once that his strength, his will, made him a law unto himself?

A dark flush stained his face, and he wrote quickly on and on. When he had finished, and signed his

telegram "The Chamois Hunter," he hurried away to buy a ticket, and was only just in time. He sprang into an empty first-class carriage, and threw himself into a seat as the train began to move slowly out of the station.

In his brain rang the intoxicating music of his great resolve. He could see nothing, think of nothing but that. His arms ached to clasp the girl he loved; his lips, cheated last night, already felt her kisses. For she would give them now, and she would give herself. He was treading the past of an Empire under foot to win her, and every throb of the engine brought them nearer together.

But such moments of exaltation come seldom in a lifetime. The heart of man or woman could not go on for ever playing the wild refrain of their accompaniment; and so it was that, as the minutes passed, the song of the blood in Maximilian's veins fell to a minor key. He thought still of Sylvia, and thought of her with passion which would be satisfied at any cost; but he thought of lesser things as well. He viewed the course which his meditated action laid out before him, like a man who rides a race for life or death across strange country, where none have passed before.

There was no one on earth whom Maximilian of Rhaetia feared, but there was one to whom he owed much, and whom it would be grievous to offend. In his father's day, one man, old even then, had built

upon the foundations of a disastrous past a great and prosperous nation. This man had been to Maximilian what his father could never have been; and, without the magnetic gift of inspiring affection, had instilled respect and gratitude in the breast of an enthusiastic boy.

“Poor old von Markstein!” the Emperor said to himself. “He will feel this sorely. I would spare him if I could; yet I cannot live my life for him——”

He sighed, and looked up frowning at some sudden sound. Like a spirit called from the vasty deep, there stood the Chancellor at the door between Maximilian’s compartment and the next.

CHAPTER XII

BETWEEN MAN AND MAN

OLD Iron Heart was dressed in the long, double-breasted grey overcoat, and wore, pulled over his eyes, the grey slouch hat, in which all snapshot photographs (no others had ever been taken) represented him.

At sight of the Emperor, leaning with folded arms against the red plush cushions, he took off his famous hat, to show the bald, shining dome of his great head, fringed with hair of curiously mingled black and white.

"Good-day, your Majesty," he observed, with no sign of surprise in voice or countenance.

The train rocked from side to side, and it was with difficulty that the old man kept his footing; but he stood rigidly erect, supporting himself in the doorway, until the Emperor invited him to enter and be seated.

"I am glad that you are well enough to travel, Chancellor," cried Maximilian. "We had none too

encouraging an account of you from Captain Otto the day before yesterday."

"I travel because you travel, your Majesty," said Iron Heart.

They now sat facing each other, on opposite seats, and the Emperor, combating a boyish sense of guilt, stared fixedly at the square visage, on which the afternoon light cruelly scored the detail of each wrinkle.

"Soh?" said Maximilian.

"Your Majesty, I have served you, and your father before you. I think you trust me somewhat?"

"No man more. But this sounds a momentous preface. Is it possible you find it necessary to 'lead up' to the subject, if I can have the pleasure of doing you a favour?"

"It is no preface, your Majesty. I am too blunt a man to begin with prefaces when I serve in the capacity, not of diplomat, but friend. For you have allowed me to call myself your friend."

"I have asked it of you."

"If I seemed to 'lead up' to what I have to say, it is only for the sake of explanation. You are wondering, perhaps, how I knew that you would travel to-day, and why, knowing it, I ventured to follow. I learned your intention by accident" (the Chancellor did not, for all his boasted bluntness, tell what lay behind that accident); "wishing much to talk over with you a pressing matter which brooks no delay, I

took this liberty, and seized the opportunity of speaking with you alone. Some men in my situation would think it wiser to pretend that business of their own had brought them on the journey, and that the meeting had come about by chance. But I am not one to work in the dark, and I want your Majesty to know the truth." Which no doubt he did; but perhaps not quite the whole truth.

"You raise my curiosity," said Maximilian.

"I will not keep it waiting long," said Iron Heart. "Have I your indulgence to speak frankly, not wholly as a servant of the Emperor to his master, but as man to man—an old man to a young one?"

"I would have you speak in no other way," answered Maximilian; but he uttered the words with a certain constraint, and the softness died out of his eyes.

"I have had a letter from Friedrich, the Crown Prince of Abruzzia. It has come to his ears that there is reason for your Imperial Majesty's delay in following up the first overtures for an alliance with his family. Gossip has told him that your Majesty's affections have become otherwise engaged, and he has written to me as a friend, asking me to contradict or confirm the rumour."

"I am not sure that negotiations had progressed far enough in that matter to give him the right of inquiry," said Maximilian, flushing.

The old man spread out his hands—the pathetic

hands of age—in a deprecatory gesture. “I fear, in my zeal for your Majesty’s welfare and the welfare of Rhaetia, I somewhat exceeded my instructions,” he confessed. “My one excuse is, that I believed your mind to be entirely made up. I still believe so. I would listen to no one who told me otherwise. And I will inform Friedrich that——”

“You must even get yourself and me out of the scrape as gracefully as you can, since you admit you got us into it,” broke in the Emperor, sinfully glad of the chance to transfer a fraction of the blame to other shoulders. “If Princess Sylvia of Eltzburg-Neuwald is as charming as she is said to be, her only difficulty will be to choose a husband, not to get one. For once gossip has told the truth, and I would not pay the Princess so poor a compliment as to ask for her hand when my heart is irrevocably given to another woman.”

“It is of that other I would speak with you also, your Majesty. Gossip has named her. May I do the same?”

“I will save you the trouble, Chancellor,” retorted Maximilian, “for I am not ashamed that at last the common fate of all has overtaken me—common, because they say every man loves once before he dies; yet uncommon, because no man ever loved such a woman. There is no one in the world like Miss de Courcy—the English lady who saved my life on the eve of my birthday, as you know.”

"It is natural that you should feel grateful, your Majesty."

"It is natural that I should feel love; impossible that I should not feel it."

"Natural that being still young and inexperienced in such matters, your Majesty should mistake gratitude for love; impossible that you should let the mistake continue."

"If it were a mistake! I am keeping to my bargain, Chancellor, and talking with you man to man, for I know you won't try me too far. In such a connection it would be better not to mention the word 'mistake.' I am glad that you followed me, for I may as well say that I meant you should know my intentions within a few days. You, of course, would have known before anyone."

"Intentions, your Majesty? I fear I grow old and slow of understanding."

"For you to be slow of understanding would be a change indeed. I spoke of my intentions towards Miss de Courcy."

"You would make the lady some handsome present, as an acknowledgment of your indebtedness?"

"Whether handsome or not would be largely a matter of opinion," said the Emperor, smiling for the first time. "I am making her a present of myself."

The old man had sat with his chin sunk into his short neck, peering out from under his brows in a

way he had; but he lifted his head suddenly, and there was a look in his eyes like that of an animal who scents danger from an unexpected quarter.

"Your Majesty!" he exclaimed incredulously. "You are your father's son. You are Rhaetia. Your standard of honour cannot be soiled for a woman's sake."

"You misunderstand me," said Maximilian, in haste. "I speak of marriage."

The Chancellor's jaw dropped, and the warm mahogany hue of his skin paled to a sickly yellow. For a moment his lips quivered in a vain effort to formulate words, but he fought with his weakness and conquered.

"I had dreamed of nothing as bad as this, your Majesty," he blurted out, with no sugaring of the truth this time. "I had heard the rumour connecting your most august name with that of a stranger from another country. I feared a young man's impulsiveness. I dreaded a scandal. But—forgive me, your Majesty, this thought of yours is no less than madness. For a man in your position, a morganatic marriage would spell ruin——"

"A morganatic marriage was in my mind, I admit," the Emperor cut him short once more. "But I saw the unwisdom, the injustice of that, and decided differently."

"Praise be to Heaven!" devoutly ejaculated the

Chancellor, who, in calmer moments, believed himself an atheist.

"I decided that, rather than lose something dearer than life, as dear as honour, I would make this lady—this peerless lady—Empress of Rhaetia," Maximilian went on.

With a cry the Chancellor sprang up, the veins in his forehead full to bursting. His eyes glared like those of a bull that receives the death-stroke. His working lips and the hollow sound in his throat alarmed the Emperor, who, for a few grim seconds, feared the worst. But the iron heart of old Eberhard von Markstein was not to be stilled by a single blow.

He muttered a word which the younger man ignored, though it smote his ears sharply. Then, after a silence potent with meaning, and punctuated with a gasp, the Chancellor "found himself" again.

"No, your Majesty, no, I say!" he panted.

"But I say yes, and no man shall give me nay. I have thought it all out and I see the path before me," insisted Maximilian. "I will make her a countess first; she shall be Countess of Salzbrück. Later, she shall be Empress."

"Your Majesty, it is impossible."

"Who dares say it is impossible? Answer me that, von Markstein. She is already a lady of unimpeachable breeding, reputation, and birth——"

"Your Majesty's pardon, while *I* say it is impos-

sible—I, von Markstein. For I tell you she has neither the position nor the birth that she claims, and I can prove it!"

Maximilian turned on him fiercely; then the old face, so closely associated with every crisis of his life, appealed to his youth and to his manhood. "Take care, von Markstein," he said, but in a different tone from that which he had meant to use.

The Chancellor—for all his apparent brusquerie, a diplomat before he was a man—was quick to see and understand the change, as quick to take advantage.

"Punish me as you will, your Majesty," he said, making no further effort to control the shaking of his voice and hands, since age and infirmity were at this moment his best advocates. "I am an old man; my work for you and yours is nearly done. Cheerfully will I bow to dismissal, if my last effort in your service may save the ship of state from wreck. I would not speak what I do not know; and I do know that the two English ladies who have been staying at the Schloss Lynarberg are not the persons they pretend to be."

"Who has been lying to you, Chancellor?" cried Maximilian, who held the temper he vowed not to lose in clenched hands.

"To me, no one. To your Majesty, to society in Salzbrück, two adventuresses have lied."

The Emperor leapt to his feet. "If you were a young man, I would kill you for that," he said.

"I know you would. Even as it is, my life is yours. But, for God's sake, for your dead father's sake, hear me first."

Maximilian stared out of the window at the vanishing landscape, his lips a tense white line. Presently he sat down.

"Very well, I will hear you," he said. "Because I do not fear to hear anything that you can say."

Already the Chancellor had marshalled his array of facts in their proper order, and now he lost no time in seizing the opening offered, lest—before all he had to say was said—the narrow way should close again.

"When I heard of your Majesty's growing admiration for the lady who was fortunate enough to save your life," he began, "I looked for her name and her mother's in a book which the English nation values next to the Bible. It is called 'Burke's Peerage.' There I found the name of Lady de Courcy, widow of a certain Sir Thomas, Baron; mother of a son, still a child, and of one living daughter, much older, a young woman with many names and twenty-eight years."

The Emperor, who had been frowning into space, turned a quick look of surprise on his Chancellor. Beginning to speak, he changed his mind, and bit his lip instead.

For a second the Chancellor paused, hoping for the lead which he had expected here; but finding that it did not come, he went on—

“I had seen the ladies at your Majesty’s birthday ball, and it seemed to me impossible that the younger could have reached so mature an age. Besides, she herself confessed to but twenty-two. This, perhaps, was not unusual, yet it set me thinking. The de Courcys, I learned by a little further reading in Burke, were distantly connected with the family of Eltzburg-Neuwald, which struck me, in the circumstances, as an odd coincidence. A Miss de Courcy became the Duke of Northminster’s wife; and to her was born a daughter who eventually married the late Grand Duke of Eltzburg-Neuwald, father of Princess Sylvia and the present Crown Prince of Abruzzia. Acting as I felt my duty to your Majesty and Rhaetia bade me act, I at once telegraphed to Friedrich, and also to Baron von Mienigen, your Majesty’s Ambassador to England.”

“What did you telegraph?” asked the Emperor, with ominous calm.

“Nothing compromising to your Majesty or to the lady, I trust you feel confident of that. I inquired of Friedrich if he had English relatives named de Courcy—a mother and daughter—traveling in Rhaetia; and begged that, if so, he would describe them, wiring an answer to me at Markstein. To von Mienigen I said that all possible particulars

regarding the widow of Sir Thomas de Courcy and her daughter, with an account of their present movements, would place me under personal obligations, and that I hoped for a speedy reply by telegraph. These messages I sent off late in the afternoon of the day before yesterday. Last night I received the answers, within two or three hours of one another. They are now here" (he tapped the breast of his coat); "have I your Majesty's permission to show them?"

"I will read what your friends have to say, if you wish," returned Maximilian coldly. His face told nothing; but the Chancellor looked down to hide the flicker of hope under his eyelids. With a slight tremor in the big blunt fingers, he unbuttoned his coat, and drew out a handsome coroneted pocket-book, given him by Maximilian. The gift had been made on the old man's sixty-fourth birthday, almost a year ago; and the sight of it now produced a certain effect, as, perhaps, Iron Heart was quietly aware.

From the pocket-book came two folded papers; and, with a bow, the Chancellor placed them in his Imperial master's hands.

The first that Maximilian opened was a telegram in Italian from the Crown Prince of Abruzzia.

"Have not the remotest idea where Lady de Courcy and her daughter are living; may be in Rhaetia or at the South Pole," it was worded with characteristic flippancy. "Have not seen either since

a visit paid to England eight years ago, then only once. Lady de Courcy is a tall old party of the dragon order, with a nose like a rocking-horse. My cousin Mary is dark, and takes after her mother. Is Otto to be the happy man?—FRIEDRICH."

With absolutely expressionless features, Maximilian tossed the paper on to the seat by his side and unfolded the other.

"Pardon delay," the Rhaetian Ambassador to Great Britain began his message. "Have been obliged to make inquiries. Lady de Courcy is the widow of Baron de Courcy, who died ten years ago, leaving one son and a daughter. The lady is not rich, and in her son's minority lets her town and country houses, living mostly abroad. She is at present in Calcutta, India, where her daughter, Miss Mary de Courcy, is engaged to marry a Judge Morley, a man of some distinction. Kindly let me hear if there are other particulars you desire to know, and I will endeavour to obtain them.—MIENIGEN."

"Well!" the Emperor threw aside the telegram, and laughed. Rather a forced laugh, perhaps, but still it was a laugh. "Is it possible that so wise a man of the world as yourself, Chancellor, dares to call two ladies 'adventuresses' on such slight grounds as these; or have you more cards up your sleeve?"

Von Markstein breathed quickly. He had counted on the Emperor's former strict regard for Court etiquette, the well-known sternness of his principle; and

he had not prepared himself for such an answer. But then, he had yet to make the acquaintance of Maximilian as a man in love.

He hesitated for a reply. In truth, he had founded his theory on this basis, and he still considered it amply sufficient to satisfy anyone save a madman. But if Maximilian were mad, he must be treated accordingly; therefore the Chancellor condescended to "bluff."

"It is not yet time to play the trumps which I keep in my sleeve, your Majesty," he said, as firmly as if he had not been conscious of his sleeve's emptiness. "But I am sure, when you have thought the matter over—perhaps deigned to talk it over with me—you will see that the cards I have laid before you are all-sufficing. The ladies styling themselves de Courcy have come to Rhaetia under false colours. They have either deceived Lady West, or they have forged the letters of introduction purporting to be from her."

"Why didn't you telegraph Lady West, while your hand was in, my friend?" asked Maximilian, feigning indifference to the answer.

"I did, your Majesty, since you ask the question. At least, not knowing the address which would find her soonest, I wired a friend of hers, an acquaintance of my own, begging him to speak with Lady West, not mentioning my name in the matter. But as yet I have received no response to that telegram."

"Until you do, I should think that even an old cynic like yourself, Chancellor, might have given two defenceless, inoffensive ladies the benefit of the doubt."

"Inoffensive, you call them?" protested Iron Heart incredulously. "Inoffensive, when they came to this country for the purpose of using the young woman's beauty to ensnare your Majesty's affections, to entrap you into some sort of declaration? But, great Heaven, it is true indeed that my brain feels the advance of years! I have forgotten to implore that your Majesty will tell me whether you have mentioned the word *marriage* to the lady? I pray that you have not so far compromised yourself and Rhaetia."

"I will answer that question by another. Do you believe that Miss de Courcy came to Rhaetia for the express purpose of 'entrapping me,' as you call it?"

"In truth, I scarcely credit even *her* ambition with as high a flight as your Majesty's avowed intentions. I believe that she would have been satisfied with far less—*far less*."

"In that case, you think she would have been overjoyed with an offer to become the morganatic wife of the Emperor?"

"'Overjoyed' is a mild word, your Majesty. Overwhelmed might be nearer."

"Yet I tell you that she refused me last night, and

is leaving Rhaetia to-day rather than listen to further entreaties."

Maximilian leaned forward to launch this thunderbolt, his brown hands on his knees, his eyes eager. The recollections, half bitter, half sweet, called up by his own words, caused Sylvia to appear in his imagination more beautiful, more completely desirable even than before.

He was delighted with the expression on von Markstein's face, though it quickly faded. "Now, what arguments have you left?" he broke out in the brief silence.

"All that I had before—more, indeed. For what your Majesty has said only shows that the lady is more ambitious, more self-confident, therefore more dangerous, than I had supposed. She staked much upon the power of her charms; and she might have won, had you not an old servant who wouldn't be fooled by the enchantments of Helen herself."

"She *has* won," said Maximilian. Then, hastily—"God forgive me for chiming in with your humour, and speaking as if she had played a game. That is far enough from my meaning. By simply being herself she has won me, such as I am; she has proved that, if she cares at all, it is for the man and not the Emperor, since she called an offer which most ambitious women would have welcomed, an insult. Yes, Chancellor, that was the word she used; and it was almost the last she said to me; which is

the reason I am travelling to-day. And nothing that you have told me has any power to hold me back."

"By Heaven, your Majesty, I believe you look upon yourself from the point of view you credit to this English girl! You forget the Emperor in the man."

"I have thought well, and at last I see nothing in one which need interfere with the other."

"Love indeed makes men blind, and I see it spares not the eyes of Emprors."

"I have given my word to bear with you and your tongue, von Markstein."

"And I know that you will keep it. I must speak; I speak for Rhaetia, and for your better self! Your Majesty, I understand that you are now following this lady with the purpose of informing her that she has triumphed—that she is to be the Empress."

"If she will have the Emperor for her husband."

"A lady whose name is of so little value to her that she steals another! The nation will not bear it, your Majesty."

"I think you speak for yourself, not for Rhaetia, Chancellor," said Maximilian. "I am not so old as you by four-and-thirty years, yet I believe I can judge of what my people will bear at least as well as you can. The law which obliges an Emperor of Rhaetia to marry Royalty is an unwritten law, a law solely of custom, handed down through many generations. I will not spoil my life by submitting to its

yoke, since by breaking it the nation gains, rather than loses. You have seen Miss de Courcy. Where could I find another such woman for my wife—for Rhaetia's Empress?"

"You have not seen Princess Sylvia of Eltzburg-Neuwald, who is famed for her beauty."

"I have no wish to see her; her beauty is for him who has not looked on perfection. There is but one woman in the world for me; and I swear to you, von Markstein, if I cannot have her, I will go to my grave unmarried. Let the crown fall to my uncle's son. I'll not perjure myself—no, not even for Rhaetia."

The Chancellor bowed his head and held up his hands, for with gesture alone was he able to express his feelings.

"As I said," Maximilian went sharply on, "it shall be the Countess of Salzbrück who becomes the Empress. If my people love me, they will love her, and rejoice in my happiness. If they complain, why, we shall see who is master; whether to be Emperor of Rhaetia means being a mere figure-head or not. In some countries Royalty is but an ornamental survival of a picturesque past, a King or Queen is no more than a puppet which the nation loads with magnificence to do itself honour. But that is not yet so in Rhaetia, as I am ready to prove, if prove it I must. For my part, I think I shall be spared the trouble, for we Rhaetians love romance in high or low; you

only are the exception, Chancellor. And as for the story you have told me, and proved to your satisfaction, though not to mine, I would give *that* for it!" And the Emperor snapped his fingers.

"You still believe, despite what Friedrich and von Mienigen say, that mother and daughter are Lady and Miss de Courcy?"

"I believe that, whoever they may be, they are of stainless reputation, and that any apparent mystery is capable of satisfactory explanation. Knowing Miss de Courcy, it would be impossible to believe less well of her. She is herself; that is enough for me. Perhaps, Chancellor, the mistake is all your own, and there are two Lady de Courcys."

"Only one is mentioned in Burke, your Majesty."

"Burke isn't gospel, whatever English people think."

"Pardon me, it is the gospel of the British peerage. It can no more be guilty of an error than Euclid."

"Nor can Miss de Courcy be guilty of a theft. I'll stake my life on that; and I tell you again, Chancellor, that your lame conclusions have proved nothing."

The old man accepted his rebuke in momentary silence. But, after a pause, equal to three or four whole notes in music, he spoke slowly and respectfully:

"Your Majesty referred, a short time ago, to certain other cards, which you suggested—in a playful

way—I might be concealing for future use. I did not deny the accusation, and if I have not yet laid down these cards, your Majesty, do not take it as a sign that they are not in my possession.”

“It is often good policy to lead trumps,” said Maximilian, not without a sneer.

“In whist, but not in all games, your Majesty. I hold mine for the present. But—is your indulgence for the old man quite exhausted?”

“Not quite, though slightly strained, I will confess,” Maximilian said, tempering the words with half a smile.

“Then I have one, and only one, more important question to ask, venturing to remind you first that, to the best of my belief, I have acted solely in your interest. If I feel that such a step as you contemplate would be my death-blow, it is simply because I love you and love Rhaetia before all else. Tell me, your Majesty, this one thing. If it were proved to you that the lady you know as Miss de Courcy was, not only not the person she pretended to be, but in other respects unworthy of your love—unworthy in a way that no man can forgive—what would you do then?”

“You speak of impossibilities.”

“But if they were *not* impossibilities?”

“In such a case I would do as other men do—spend the rest of my life in trying to forget a lost ideal.”

"I thank your Majesty; that is all I now ask. I suppose—you will continue your journey?"

"Yes, I continue my journey as far as Wandeck, where I hope to find Lady and Miss de Courcy."

"Then, your Majesty, when I have expressed my deep gratitude for your forbearance—even though I failed to be convincing—I will trouble you no longer."

The Chancellor rose, slowly and painfully, with a reminiscence of the gout, and Maximilian regarded him in surprise. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"Only that since I can do no further good, I shall, with your permission, get out at this station, and go back to Salzbrück."

The Emperor realised, what he had not noticed until this moment, that the train was slowing down, as it passed into the suburbs of a town. He and the Chancellor had talked together for a full hour, and he was far from regretting the prospect of being left to himself. More than once he had come perilously near to losing his temper, forgetting his gratitude and the old man's years. How much longer he could have held out, under a continued strain of provocation, he did not know; and he spoke no word of dissuasion, as Count von Markstein picked up his hat and buttoned the well-known grey overcoat for departure.

"I have passed pleasanter hours in your society, I admit," said Maximilian, when the train stopped.

"But I thank you for your motives, if not your maxims; and here's my hand."

The Chancellor bowed low, until only the shining top of his bald head was visible, as he accepted the token of amnesty.

"If your Majesty would grant me yet one more favour in this connection, I should be grateful," he declared. "I find myself fatigued by the anxieties of the past few days, and I shall rest for some hours at my house in Salzbrück. Will you communicate with me by telephone when you have reached Wandeck, saying whether you remain there; whether you return at once; or whether you go farther?"

"I will do that willingly," said Maximilian. Again he pressed the Chancellor's hand, which was very cold, as the hands of old persons sometimes are; and five minutes later he was journeying on, alone.

CHAPTER XIII

NEWS BY TELEPHONE

WHEN the Emperor arrived at Wandeck he went immediately to the hotel which, in his telegram, he had designated as a place of meeting. But no such ladies as he hoped to find had come to the Maximilianhof; and the question raised by this intelligence was, whether Miss de Courcy had failed to receive his message, or, having received, had chosen to ignore it.

The doubt, harrowing while it lasted, was solved by returning to the Bahnhof; though certainty proved scarcely less tantalising than uncertainty had been. The telegram was still in the hands of the stationmaster, to whose care it had been addressed. This diligent person had himself gone through the Orient express, from end to end, inquiring for Miss de Courcy, but no one had responded. The lady might already have left the train at Wandeck, it was true; her description might be given and inquiries made; but she would certainly not have had time to

go far, and return to the train again, before its departure.

It was evident through the short conversation that the unfortunate official was on pins and needles. Struck by the Emperor's features, which he had seen so often in painting and photograph, it yet seemed impossible that the greatest man in Rhaetia could thus be travelling about the country, in ordinary morning dress, and unattended. Sure at one instant that it must be the Emperor, as sure the next that it was not, the poor fellow struggled against his confusion in a way that would have amused Maximilian, had he not been too much engrossed with other matters even to observe it. With a manner that essayed the difficult mean between reverence due to Royalty and commonplace courtesy good enough for everyday gentlemen, the stationmaster volunteered to ascertain whether the ladies described had passed out, delivering up their tickets. A few moments of suspense followed; then came the news that no such persons had been seen.

Here was a quandary. Since Mady de Courcy and her mother had not travelled by the Orient express, where had they gone on leaving the Hohenburgerhof? Had they deceived Baroness von Lynar regarding their intentions, for the purpose of blinding the Emperor (a purpose well served), or had they simply changed their minds, as women may? Was it possible that they had changed them so rad-

ically as to go back to Schloss Lynarberg; or had they chosen to be mysterious, and vanish from Rhaetia, leaving no trace behind? Maximilian recalled the Chancellor's revelations, then dismissed them as soon as thought of. Wherever lay the clue to this tangle, it was not in any act of which Mary de Courcy need be ashamed.

There seemed to be nothing for it but to go back to Salzbrück and await developments, or rather, stir them up by every means within his power. This was the course which Maximilian chose; and, just as he was about to act upon it, he remembered his careless promise to Count von Markstein.

There was a telephone in the railway station, and in a few moments came the "ping" of the bell which told that connection was established; then the "Hello!" which Germany and Rhaetia had adopted from America, brought an answering squeak, unmistakably in the Chancellor's voice.

"My friends are not here; I am starting for Salzbrück again by the next train," cautiously remarked the Emperor. "I don't see the use of bothering with this, but would not break my promise. That's all; good-bye—Eh?—what did you say?"

"I—have—a—piece of extraordinary news for you," came over the wire from Salzbrück. "About the ladies."

"What is it?" demanded Maximilian, in the pause that followed.

"I hinted of information which might make you see certain matters differently. I could not speak more definitely then, for I was not sure. Now I *am* sure. Your friends did not go by the Orient express."

"I know that already," returned the Emperor, whose eyes began to flash, and who glared at the telephone as if it were some noxious beast spitting venom.

"They gave out that they were leaving Rhaetia. But they have not crossed the frontier."

"I am much obliged to you for the information. It is exactly what I wanted," was the Emperor's retort.

"You know who bought a hunting-lodge near Bünden, in the Niederwald, last year?"

"Yes, I know whom you mean," went sullenly over the wire. "What has that to do with my friends?"

"Only that one of them has gone there. You can guess which. The others remain in Salzbrück. It seems that the—new owner of the hunting-lodge has known them for some time, though he was ignorant of this malicious masquerade. The one of whom we spoke is an actress. The owner arrived at the lodge this morning, drove into town, where your friend had waited, evidently expecting him, invited her to pay him a visit; and the invitation was accepted."

"I'll never believe that till I see them together, with my own eyes!"

"Will you go with me to-night when you return, and honour them with an unexpected call?"

"I will—d——n you!" shouted the Emperor. It was the first time that he had ever so far forgotten his dignity as to swear at the Chancellor.

He dropped the receiver, tossed a gold coin, with his own head upon it (at the moment he could have wished he had no other), down on the attendant's desk, and, waving away an offer of change, stalked out of the office.

Beneath his breath he swore again, the strongest oaths which the rich language of his fatherland provided, anathematising, not the maligned woman whom he loved, but the man who had maligned her.

There was madness in the thought that she could be false to herself and her confession of love for him. He would not entertain it. Let the whole world reek with foulness, if only his love might still shine above it white and remote as the young moon in heaven.

The old man, whose life would scarce be safe could his Emperor lay hands upon him in his present mood—this old man had a grudge against the one perfect girl on earth. There was no shameful rage of gossip which he would not stoop to pick up from the mud and fly as a flag of battle, calming his conscience (if he still kept one) by saying that it was "for the country's good."

Telling himself these things and many others, Maximilian hurried away to inquire for the next train back to Salzbrück. There would not be another for three hours. It would be impossible to restrain his impatience for so long, sure as he was of his love's innocence. There was a raging tiger in his breast, that would not cease to tear him until he had seen Mary de Courcy, told her what it was in his heart to do for her sake, received her answer, and, through it, punished the Chancellor.

The only way to do all this without intolerable delay was to abandon his design to be inconspicuous, and order a special train. He could have one, it appeared, in an hour, or a little more. The journey to Salzbrück would occupy three hours, and it would therefore be well on toward eight o'clock before he could start for the hunting-lodge named by von Markstein. Drive as fast as he might, he could not reach the place before half-past nine; still, he would go, and the Chancellor should go with him. Not because Miss de Courcy would be there, but rather, because she would not; and because von Markstein must be made to confess the criminal error into which his misplaced zeal had led him.

CHAPTER XIV

THE CHANCELLOR'S LUCK

"Desperate remedies
For diseases desperate grown."

"TELL the truth—when convenient; spice with prevarication—when necessary; and never part with the *whole* truth at one time, since waste is sinful," might have been the wording of Iron Heart's maxim; and he had made the most of that wise policy to-day.

He had told the Emperor no lies,—even through the telephone, when carelessness may be admissible; but he had arranged his truths as skilfully as pawns upon a chess-board. It was said by some who pretended to know, that Count Eberhard von Markstein had had a Jesuit for a tutor; but be this as it would, it was certain that, when he had a goal to reach, he did not pick his footsteps by the way. A flower here and there might be trodden down in his progress, a small life broken, a reputation stained; but what was

that when the nation's standard was to be set upon the mountain-top?

Supposing he had said to the Emperor, after his promise of plain speaking, "Your Majesty is on a wild-goose chase. Those you seek have not left Salzbrück; they are still at the Hohenburgerhof. Otto told me they had left Lynarberg, and I called upon them at the hotel, meaning to frighten them away, as the spider frightened Miss Muffitt, by telling them that I knew all, and they had better flit, of their own accord, if they did not wish to be assisted over the frontier. They refused to see me, alleging as an excuse that some obscure person in their ménage, named Collinson, had been seized with sudden illness, which would prevent their departure from Rhaetia for the present. While I awaited their answer at the hotel, your Majesty telephoned from the Bahnhof; at least, I was certain that it must be your Majesty, and no other. Fortunately for my plans, I overheard the person at the telephone communicating the message received to the manager, and ventured to use my influence with the landlord, not only toward obtaining permission to dictate the reply, but a promise that the transaction should be confidential. By the fact that the message came from the railway station, I judged that your Majesty contemplated following the Orient express, in which the ladies would have gone, had it not been for their companion's illness. I learned that no special had been or-

dered, and the time of the first train in which it would be possible for you to travel, then I took my place before your Majesty got in. Had my eloquence convinced you of Miss de Courcy's unworthiness, I should have urged you to return with me, thus sparing you the annoyance of a useless journey to Wandeck. As matters stood, however, I was delighted to get you out of the way, that I might hurry back and manufacture the trumps alleged to be kept in my sleeve, before you could return and interfere with my machinations." Supposing Count von Markstein had said all this, it is not probable that Rhaetia would long have rejoiced in so wise, so self-sacrificing a Chancellor.

Iron Heart had meekly declared his readiness to resign, but he had counted (as people who risk much for great ends usually do count) on not being taken at his word. He loved power, because he had always had it, and without it life would not have been worth living; but it was honestly for the country's sake—even for Maximilian's sake, rather than his own—that he desired to retain his high position. Without his strong hand to seize the reins, if Maximilian dropped them for a careless instant, he conscientiously believed that the chariot of state was lost.

He had said what he could; he had done his best to disillusion a young man in love with an adventuress; now, neither as Chancellor nor friend could he openly continue to protest, unless favoured by fate

with some striking new developments. Privately, however, he had but taken the first step toward interference; and he meant, since worst had come to worst, to go much further. He would not even have considered it sinful to kill a woman of the type to which he assigned Mary de Courcy, if nothing less than removal from an earthly sphere could have kept her from the throne of Rhaetia.

Long before his destination was reached, he had decided upon his next move. Unfortunately, its ultimate success depended upon an outside influence. But as that influence was to be Otto's, and old Eberhard held the power of making Otto a rich man or a beggar, he was not without confidence as to the result.

During the early visit paid by the younger brother to the elder that morning, it had been arranged that he should be ready, on the receipt of a telegram, instantly to place his services at Eberhard's disposal. Thus, a message despatched from the place at which the Emperor and the Chancellor had parted, was supposed to assure Otto's meeting the returning train in an hour's time at Salzbrück.

Still, accidents do happen sometimes, to upset the best-laid schemes, therefore it was a relief to the mind of Count von Markstein to thrust his head from the carriage window on entering the station, and to behold his brother's handsome face looking up from the crowd on the arrival platform.

"Well?" said Otto, as they walked away to the carriage which awaited them outside.

"Well!" echoed the Chancellor. "That is exactly what it is not. But it shall be—it shall be well; and you shall help to make it so."

Otto flushed. "In the manner we talked of the other day?" he asked dubiously.

"No; I do not now intend that you shall marry the girl. Knowing her to be an impostor, I know that the most degenerate von Markstein is too good to mate with her," said the old man, the lash of his tongue cutting in two ways at once. "But Maximilian has lost his head, and there's only one hope left, it seems, that he will find it in time to save the country a great disaster. It must be proved to him that the woman he honours is worthless; that while she angles to catch a big fish, she does not disdain to play with a small one."

"Meaning, we'll show the Emperor that Miss de Courcy has been flirting with me," finished Otto. "With all my heart, dear brother, if that were possible—for I owe her a grudge. But I confess I did not tell you all there was to tell, this morning, when I rode over from Schloss Lynarberg. I spared myself the embarrassment of mentioning that, after the garden scene which I described to you, Miss de Courcy and I had a little private scene of our own. I was stupid enough to choose the wrong moment for declaring my sentiments and expressing my sym-

pathy. Not only did the young lady refuse to forgive me, at the time, but I know very well that she never will forgive me, in future. She will have nothing to do with me after this; she has forbidden me to speak to her again. Therefore, with the best intentions in the world, I am"—

"You are a fool!" exclaimed the Chancellor.

"Not quite, I trust. Only wait till I have finished, and even my brother may admit that, though there's no hope for me in an affair of the heart with Miss de Courcy, there is a little still left for me as the aide-de-camp of a diplomatist. Who do you think has just arrived in Salzbrück?"

"The devil, I should say, by the way things are going," returned the Chancellor.

"I've heard him called so more than once. That's why I thought he might be useful now. And as it happens, he's in a mood for mischief. I met him on my way to the station, in his dog-cart, in which he had driven to town from Bünden."

"From Bünden! Then it is the Prince"—

"Of Darkness, you've just named him."

The Chancellor heard neither the flippant interruption nor the still more flippant laugh accompanying it. His hard features brightened with grim joy. "Providence fights for us!" he murmured.

"With the devil for a weapon, you would put it, brother? Or should we rather be polite, and say that

the Prince is like the ram caught by its horns in the bushes, ready for sacrifice?"

"I pray that he be caught, and not already out of reach—for there's no single moment to be lost, if this marvellous chance is not to slip past me," said the Chancellor, too deeply preoccupied to resent his brother's levity.

"What reward shall I deserve if I take you to him inside the half-hour?"

"You do not forget your own interests, no matter what issues are at stake! But you have served me in this instance. At the beginning of the quarter you shall have the sum I mentioned the other day; while, if the Prince works with me, and the cause is won, you shall be my heir; I promise it. Where is the Prince?"

"By a queer deal of the cards, by this time he's at the place you'd choose to have him, of all others; the Hohenburgerhof. He has been to call on you at your town house, he told me, and not finding you at home, meant to dine early at the hotel and look you up again later. He left a note, it seems, which you will find if you go home."

"It can wait; I go to the Prince direct," pronounced the Chancellor.

And the coachman was bidden to drive his fastest to the Hohenburgerhof, in the Maximilian Platz.

The Prince who, according to Iron Heart's belief, had been sent to him by Providence, was engaged,

when the Chancellor arrived, in selecting the wines for his dinner. He was in the private apartments which he had taken for the afternoon, and expressed himself through an obsequious servant as being delighted to receive Count von Markstein.

Otto's mission having been fulfilled and finished, it was only the broad figure in the grey overcoat which was ushered ceremoniously into the room known at the hotel as the "Purple Salon of the Royal suite."

As the Chancellor was shown in, a young man jumped from an easy-chair, flung aside the wine list, and came toward the guest with extended hands. It would have been useless to scour the world in search of a handsomer young man than he. Even Otto von Markstein, justly remarkable for his good looks, was insignificant compared with this youth. He and the Chancellor were not new acquaintances by any means, and the vital organ which had given Iron Heart his nickname was not to be softened by beauty in male or female; but at this moment he rejoiced in the physical perfection of the Prince who would be a dangerous rival even for an Emperor.

Count von Markstein had pronounced his brother a fool for throwing away his chances of success in a flirtation with Miss de Courcy, but he was almost ready now to see a gift from Fortune in Otto's cause for spite against the girl. Had she not offended the young man's *amour-propre* in revenge for his tact-

less declaration, Otto's natural instinct would have been to protect her from rather than deliver her up to the enemy. And had Otto let him—Eberhard—go home, without knowledge of the Prince's presence in Salzbrück, hours must have been ignorantly squandered—precious hours, big with the fate of Rhaetia.

"My dear Prince!" exclaimed Count von Markstein, taking into his gnarled old hands the two young, strong, white ones held out to him.

"My dear Chancellor!" echoed the bland Apollo, smiling, and wasting in that act dimples that would have transformed a plain woman into a beauty.

"You had been to my house?"

"I had. No doubt my friend Otto has seen and told you."

"He would be honoured by the appellation. It was the news he gave me which brought me here in haste from the station."

"Good. You will dine with me, then. I insist! It was to be an early dinner, that I might call afterwards on you at the first moment when your servants thought you likely to return."

"I thank you, and in other circumstances nothing could give me greater pleasure. But I have business of the sort which makes even a weary man forget the delights of good companionship and a good dinner."

"Is the business *my* business, Chancellor?"

"I hope that you will think it so. At least it is business that must be done now or never, and means life or death to those whom it concerns. How it is to be done, or whether done at all, depends upon you; and it could be placed in no more skilful hands. If I had been given my choice of an instrument out of the whole world, had I dared I would have chosen you."

"This sounds like an adventure."

"It may indeed be an adventure, and an act of justice too."

"I expected nothing so good when I came over the frontier this morning. You can guess what brought me to my little den in the Niederwald at this particular time. It was not for hunting. But, though my mind is full of certain grave affairs, I trust I have still the instinct of a sportsman."

"I am sure of that. Especially when your birds and mine can be killed with one shot."

"Chancellor, you interest me more and more."

The old man smiled gratitude, but under the bristling brows glowed a light like the last embers in a dying fire. "Upstairs," said he abruptly, "is a pretty woman. She says her name is Mary de Courcy, though there are some of us who know better. Her love affairs threaten a public scandal."

"Ah, the lady of whom all Rhaetia talks is under the same roof with me!" exclaimed the young man, with slightly heightened colour.

"To you, more than to any other, I can speak freely of our danger," said the Chancellor. "This girl has driven the Emperor into a fit of moon-madness. Heaven grant it may soon pass; and blessed would be the man who brought my poor master to his senses. If you would, Prince, *you might be that man*. The sword of justice is ready for your hand."

"That sentence has a solemn ring. I know what I came here to do. But you seem to be preparing a different programme. Tell me, what sort of woman is this who has bewitched your grave Maximilian?"

"She is beautiful and clever, as women are clever; but not clever enough to fight her battle out against you and me."

"Me? I do not fight with women; I make love to them."

"Ah, you have said it! my dear Prince, that is what I want."

Apollo laughed. "Describe the girl," he said. "Is she fair or dark, tall or short, a slim Diana or a sumptuous Venus?"

"She is tall and slender, with the pink and white skin of a child; and she is dark-browed and yellow-haired, like the beauties of Austria," replied the Chancellor, doing justice to the enemy's charms, not so much through conscientious motives as because he desired to paint a pleasing picture. "Her eyes are brown or violet; having nearly reached my three-score years and ten, I cannot tell you which. Her

nose is of the Greek type, yet a trifle more piquant, it may be. Doubtless a poet would rave of her lips, red as geraniums on snow; and even I can affirm that when the lady looks down, and then looks up smiling with great play of dark curled lashes, the effect is somewhat striking. I can imagine that smile might quicken the pulses of a younger man than I."

"It would quicken mine only to hear you tell of it, if you had not put a maggot in my head that tickles me to laughter instead of raptures," said the Prince, who was fully mindful of his own supremacy over women. "Has this girl who calls herself de Courcy a little black mole on her forehead just above the left eyebrow, and in that notable smile of hers, does the mouth point upward at the right, like a fairy sign-post showing the way to a small scar that masquerades as a dimple?"

The Chancellor gravely reflected for a moment, and then replied that to the best of his belief both these marks were distinctly visible on the lady's countenance. He did not add that he had met her but once, and had no eye for delicate details; for whatever the Prince's theory might be, it seemed advisable to establish it. "Is it possible that you have met this dangerous young person?" he inquired, hiding eagerness.

"Well, I begin to believe that I have reason for thinking so, exactly why, I will tell you at another time—it means a confession. But a lady answering

the description you have given might easily be in this neighbourhood—I'd heard she was in Rhaetia; in fact, when I suddenly made up my mind to come, I thought it not impossible that I might meet her. We'd quarrelled, after my having been weak enough one day to take her imprudently into my confidence concerning family affairs. This *coup* she has so nearly made may be by way of revenge on me. She's capable of the clever conception, too; but where did she develop the mother? I fancy I have heard that there *is* a mother?"

"There is a marionnette which answers to the name," drily announced the Chancellor. "But mothers are articles of easy manufacture."

The Prince was immensely amused. "No, she wouldn't stick at a mother, if she wanted one," he chuckled; "and, while she was about it, she appears to have annexed a whole family tree as well. That mole and the scar-dimple—you're sure of them, Chancellor? And the drawing up of the lips to the right when she smiles?"

"Sure," calmly asseverated Iron Heart.

"Then the more pieces in this little puzzle that I fit together, the more likely does it seem that your Miss de Courcy, who has been turning Rhaetia upside down—to say nothing of Rhaetia's Emperor—is neither more nor less than Miss Minnie Brand, one of the cleverest, and certainly one of the prettiest actresses England has owned for a century."

"You met her in England?"

"No—o, not in England"; the Prince suddenly became non-committal. "But we were great friends. After our quarrel she disappeared, disbanding her company, letting them go on while she stopped at a Rhaetian watering-place. Ha, ha! now I think of it, I should not be surprised if she had hoped to make of me a more egregious fool than she appears to have made of Maximilian. It is possible she fancied at one time that I might be ass enough to offer her marriage."

"The Emperor has offered her marriage."

"*What?* With the left hand, of course—though even that would be unheard of."

"I swear to you that if something can't be done to stop him, he will make her Empress of Rhaetia. He has told me so to-day with his own lips."

"Gad! Little Minnie Brand! I didn't half appreciate her brilliant qualities."

"Yet I wager, Prince, that she appreciated yours."

Apollo shrugged his shoulders. "I believe she liked me. Yes, I believe *that* wasn't acting."

"Is it long since you parted—if I may ask as much?"

"Oh yes, you may ask and be answered, Chancellor. It is only long enough for her to have said good-bye to the old love, and taken comfortably up with the new."

"But what if she still cared for the old—if the past

could be revived? Prince, I tell you frankly, I now pin all my hopes on you. Even when I thought only that if a meeting between you two could be arranged, your fascinations might produce a speedy effect—even then I hoped something. Now, I hope *everything*—if you will consent to see her. I beg you will do that—without delay. I beg that you will send up your card, and request the lady to receive you. That alone would be much to go upon with the Emperor, who is of a jealous disposition; but, if there could be more—if you could persuade her to”—

“Persuade her to—what?” asked the Prince, when the old man paused for breath and inspiration.

“If she would go to your hunting-lodge—if the Emperor could know that she was there he would be cured, once for all. Rhaetia would be saved—by you. And regarding the business that I think has brought you—what could be better—for everyone concerned?”

“What, indeed?” echoed the Prince. “For *everyone* concerned, except for Minnie Brand.”

“After what she has done, need she be considered—before the interests of Rhaetia, and another most innocent Royal lady, whom she is doing her best to humiliate and put to shame?”

“I am not sure that she need be so considered,” said the Prince. “At all events—I will send up my card—to Miss de Courcy. As for the rest—it must manage itself.”

He took from his pocket a little gold card-case, sparkling with jewels—a trifle which advertised itself as the gift of a woman. “This shall go upstairs,” he said, selecting a bit of engraved pasteboard. “And then—we shall see.”

For five minutes, for ten minutes, after the departure of the small, silent messenger, the two men waited, talking of a subject near to both their hearts. But at the end of that time word came that Lady and Miss de Courcy would see the Prince.

“The value of a well-regulated mother!” laughed the young man, who had not requested the pleasure of meeting Lady de Courcy. “Well, whatever comes of this interview, I shall presently have something to tell you, Chancellor.”

“The suspense will be hard to bear,” said the old man. “I am not as young as I was, and these past four days have sorely tried me. Remember, I pray you, all that is at stake, and do not hesitate. Have no scruple with such a woman as this. The Emperor will shortly be returning. He will lose no time in seeing the girl, and—once they have had another meeting, all our precautions will be too late.”

The Prince did not smile as he went out.

He had bidden the Chancellor to await his return in the salon of the “Royal suite,” which was usually put at his disposal when he was in Rhaetia, and drove in from the Niederwald to Salzbrück. Other Royalties from foreign countries, or from the prov-

inces, occasionally occupied it also—hence its name; and Apollo was not the first Prince whom old Eberhard von Markstein had visited in the “Royal suite” of the Hohenburgerhof. The Chancellor knew by heart the rich purple hangings in the salon, with the gold double wolf-head of Rhaetia embroidered on their folds; and he sickened of them now, as the moments dragged on and on, and he was left alone.

When half an hour had passed, he could no longer sit still on the purple velvet sofa, but walked up and down, his hands behind him, scowling at the full-length portraits of Rhaetia’s former Emperors, glaring a question at his own reflection in the many huge gold-framed mirrors, a question he would have given his life to hear answered in the way he wished.

Three-quarters of an hour had gone at last, and still the Chancellor paced the room from end to end, and still the Prince did not come back to tell the news. Had the young man failed him? Had that Vivien upstairs twisted the boy round her finger, as she had twisted one who was stronger and greater than he? Was it possible that she had wormed the whole secret from the Prince and then ordered him away from the hotel, leaving her enemy fuming in the house?

But no, there were footsteps outside the door; the handle was turned. At least the Prince was true to his promise.

As the Chancellor had said, he was no longer as

young as he had been. His lips parted; yet he could not speak, when he would have asked for the result. But the Prince caught the appeal in the glittering eyes, and did not wait to be interrogated.

"Well, I have seen the lady," he said, in a voice that was indefinably changed in the interval since he and the Chancellor had separated.

"And she is the one you had known?"

"Yes. She is the one I had known. What is more, Chancellor, it—it's all right about that plan of yours. She is going with me to Bünden."

"She is? Heaven be praised! When?"

"At once. That is, as soon as she can get ready."

"Nothing could be better. I trust she goes with you alone? The presence of the mother as chaperon would be unfortunate."

"Oh, no chaperon is needed for us. The—mother stops behind with a companion they have, who is ill. It—er—it was a little difficult to arrange this matter, but—I don't think the plot will fail, provided you carry through your part as well as I have mine."

"The lady goes with you quite of her own free will?"

"I—er—I flatter myself that she is rather pleased with the invitation. In half an hour or so, if all is well, I and the lady fair will be on our way to my hunting-lodge, to spend an agreeable evening in each other's society and talk over old times. Fortunately I went straight out there this morning before coming

to Salzbrück to see you; and though I was not expected back to dinner, there will be something eatable in the house, I daresay—something I need not be ashamed to offer a lady.”

The Prince pulled a hunting-watch from the pocket of an elaborate waistcoat (he merited the reputation of being the best-dressed young man in Europe) and consulted it reflectively. “It is now nearly four thirty. By six, the hour at which I should have sat down to my early dinner here (alas, for a good dinner sacrificed on the altar of duty!), we shall be approaching the outskirts of the Niederwald, my pretty friend and I. Bünden is three miles farther on, my place two miles beyond Bünden. But before seven o’clock I shall be showing the lady the beauties of my Rhaetian hunting-lodge, which I have more than once described to her. Dinner can, on one excuse or another, be delayed until nearly nine, if it would suit your book to find us in the midst of our repast. My dining-room is not a grand salon, but it has light and colour, and would not make a bad background for the last act of this little comedy. What do you say, Chancellor? I have always thought that your success as stage-manager in the Theatre of all Nations was partially due to your regard for dramatic effects.”

“They are not to be despised,” assented the Chancellor.

“Well, I promise you that the footlights shall be

lighted, the stage set, and two of your leading puppets dressed and painted for the show, precisely at the hour of nine. When can you count on the appearance of the third?"

The bristling brows met. Von Markstein was working without scruple against Maximilian, for Maximilian's good; yet he could tolerate no light speaking of the master he would betray.

"When His Majesty telephones to me from Wanddeck as he has promised to do, on his arrival there," said the old man stiffly, "I shall inform him of what has taken place in his absence. If I know him in his present ardent mood, he will order a special train to return to Salzbrück. In that case, he will arrive before eight; and all else falling as I now confidently expect, we shall be able to reach the hunting-lodge by half-past nine."

"You will find us at the third course," prophesied the Prince.

"Naturally, the Emperor's sudden appearance will come as a blow to the lady," returned the Chancellor, watching with veiled keenness the other's placid, perfect face. "She would not dare take the risk if she dreamed that he would discover her escapade and follow, great as is the temptation to enjoy your society; indeed, Prince, you must have found subtle weapons to break so soon through the armour of her prudence. I expected much from your courage and resource, once enlisted in the cause, yet I hardly ven-

tured to expect such speedy, such unqualified success as this that seems assured."

"My weapons were sharpened on my past acquaintance with the lady," explained the Prince. "Without that, the desired result might have waited as many days as it has taken moments, though, at last, the end would perhaps have been the same."

"Not for Rhaetia. Every moment counts with us, as I have said. Thanks to you, we shall win; for actress as this woman is, she will find the justification of an evening *tête-à-tête* with you, at your hunting-lodge in the country, a task beyond her powers."

"If she makes the effort, we can afford to be audience and amuse ourselves with her acting, as the comedy plays itself out," said the Prince. "There is no doubt in my mind—whatever may be her conception of the part—as to the final tableau. And, after all, it is that alone with which you concern yourself—eh, Chancellor?"

"It is that alone," echoed the old man. "And now, lest by a hitch in the stage mechanism—since you choose that figure of speech—something should yet go wrong, I must make haste home, that I may be in time to receive the Emperor's communication from Wandeck."

"If he should forget to send—*there* would be rather a serious hitch, would it not?"

"The Emperor has never, in my knowledge of him, forgotten to keep a promise, and I am certain he is

not enough changed to do so even now. *Au revoir*, Prince; till half-past nine."

"Till half-past nine, when a warm welcome awaits you, from *one of the dramatis personæ*. For the other—I cannot answer."

Laughing, the two grasped hands on their understanding. The Chancellor went out to his carriage, which had been kept at the door; and a few minutes later he was conversing with Maximilian through the telephone.

CHAPTER XV

THE OLDNESS OF THE CHANCELLOR

MAXIMILIAN had not made an appointment with the Chancellor through the telephone, either for an hour or place of meeting. He had been in no mood at the time for the cool mapping out of details; and later, when there had been plenty of leisure for reflection, he had let himself hope that the Chancellor would already be willing to qualify his rash accusations. If this were so, the old man would be as eager to avoid a visit to the hunting-lodge as he had been a few hours ago to propose it. Maximilian did not mean to let von Markstein escape the obligation of this visit, but he would have triumphed in the Chancellor's desire to evade it, which would have meant much.

"If he still persists in his abominable idea that she has gone to the hunting-lodge," thought the Emperor (with that vagueness of expression which lovers of high or low degree use in designating the one woman in the world), "he will risk no chance of

missing me, but will be waiting at the station. Should he, on the contrary, have had reason since our talk to doubt the accuracy of his own information, he will take advantage of the uncertainty I've left him in regarding my movements, to keep out of the way."

So arguing, Maximilian looked sharply from the window as his special train entered the Salzbrück station, along the track that had been kept clear for its arrival. No other train was due from any direction at the moment, therefore few persons were on the platform, and a figure in a long grey coat, with its face shadowed by a slouch hat, was all the more conspicuous. Maximilian's heart sank. He believed in his love, but he would have preferred the Chancellor's absence.

"I hope that your Majesty will forgive the liberty I have taken in being here, to place myself at your convenience and so avoid delay," were the old man's first words, as he took off his hat to the Emperor. "I drove down from my house some time ago, expecting that you might arrive by special train; and I need hardly say that my carriage, which is waiting, is at your disposal for any use you may care to make of it."

"I wish to go instantly to the hunting-lodge near Bünden," said the Emperor, watching the other's face, and still hoping against hope for a visible sign of discomfiture. But he was not to be gratified.

"I was prepared for that wish, your Majesty," promptly said the Chancellor. "The horses are fresh, and they will make the journey in an hour and a half."

"Very well, then, there is nothing that need delay us. You are ready to go with me, of course?" Another detective glance, destined again to pass unrewarded by revelations.

"I am ready, your Majesty—as always, I trust, when I am needed."

It was on Maximilian's tongue to say that it would be well if his Chancellor's readiness confined itself entirely to such occasions; but he shut his lips upon the words and walked by the old man's side in frozen silence.

It was not yet eight o'clock, but the month of October had just begun, and the sun having set an hour or more ago, the swiftly fading Rhaetian twilight had darkened into a starlit night. Though the day had been warm, there was now a crisp keenness in the air, and the Chancellor's coachman and groom had prepared themselves with high sable collars for their country drive.

The horses, which had been kept moving up and down the long straight avenue of the Bahnhof Strasse, were nervous and restive, and no sooner had the green-liveried footman shut the carriage door than they bounded off at a pace almost beyond control.

Both windows were closed, to keep out the chill, but Maximilian impatiently lowered the one nearest him, forgetting the Chancellor's tendency to rheumatism, and stared into the night. The railway station was on the outskirts of the town; and speedily passing the few warehouses and factories in the neighbourhood, they struck into the open country. There was a pungent scent of dying leaves on the breeze that blew in through the open window, and Maximilian knew that never again could he inhale the melancholy fragrance of the falling year without recalling this hour, so vivid with sensations.

He was desperately eager to reach the end of the journey, that the Chancellor might be confounded once for all; yet, as the horses' hoofs rang tunefully along the hard roads, and landmark after landmark glided out of sight among tree-branches thickly laced with stars, he would have stayed the passing moments if he could. He wished to know, yet he did not wish to know. He burned to ask questions, yet would have died rather than put them.

It was a relief when von Markstein spoke at last; a relief that brought a prick of resentment with it; for even the Chancellor had no right to break a silence that the Emperor kept.

"Your Majesty's anger is hard to bear. Yet I can bear it uncomplainingly because I am confident that my reward is not far off. I look for it no further in the future than to-night."

"And I think that you will get your reward!" retorted the Emperor sharply.

"Not only in your forgiveness, but your thanks."

"I will forgive you when you have found Miss de Courcy for me, and begged her pardon for your calumnies."

"I have already found her, your Majesty, and am taking you to her now."

"You actually believe your own story, von Markstein? You believe that this sweet and gracious lady is a fast actress, a friend of your notoriously gallant friend, and willing to compromise her good name by paying a night visit to his hunting-lodge? You really think that we shall see her there?"

"I shall see her, your Majesty. And you will see her, if this madness you call love has not blinded the eyes of your body as well as of your mind. That she is there I know, for the Prince told me with his own lips that she was driving out to the lodge with him this afternoon."

"You mean that he told you his friend the actress was going. I'll stake my life he did not dare to say Miss de Courcy."

"He said Miss Brand, the actress, it is true. But when he called upon her at the Hohenburgerhof (where he and I had met to talk of a matter which can be no mystery to your Majesty) he asked for Miss de Courcy. And the message which came down was that Miss de Courcy would see him. This left

no doubt in my mind (however the matter may present itself to you) that she had remained in Salzbrück, after giving out that she was departing to-day, for the express purpose of a meeting with her old friend the Prince. She probably hoped that, as she was supposed to be gone, her indiscretion might be hidden from your Majesty and others."

"Pray spare me your deductions, Chancellor," said the Emperor curtly. "I am with you in this expedition to prove you wrong, not right, and nothing that you can say will convince me that the Prince's friend and Miss de Courcy are one. If we find a woman at the hunting-lodge it will not be the lady we seek; and as you will presently be ready to eat the words you have spoken, the fewer such bitter pills you have to swallow the better."

So snubbed by the young man whom he had held in his arms, an imperious as well as Imperial infant, the old statesman relapsed into silence. But he had said that which had been in his mind to say, and he was satisfied to know that it was left to rankle. Meekness was not his *métier*, but he could play the part of the faithful retainer, humbly loyal through injustice and misunderstanding, when it was the one effective rôle; and he played it now to perfection. He sat with bowed head and stooping shoulders, suggesting the weakness of old age, his hands clasped on his knee; and from time to time he breathed a stifled sigh.

His silent pathos wrung no sign of relenting from Maximilian, however, and not a word was exchanged between the two men for nearly an hour, until they had driven under the dark arch of the first trees of the Niederwald. Then it was the Emperor who spoke.

"You have led me to suppose that our call at the hunting-lodge is to take its master by surprise. Is that supposition the correct one, Chancellor?"

Count von Markstein would greatly have preferred that this question should have remained in abeyance. He had intended to convey the impression credited to him by the Emperor, but he had not wished to clothe it in actual statement. The Prince understood that he was to be the leading actor in the "little comedy" to which he had merrily referred, and he would know how to feign the astonishment indispensable to success. It was to be hoped that he would have the skill to carry it out to the end, since the Chancellor was now called upon irrevocably to commit himself.

"Were our visit expected, we should not be likely to find the lady, your Majesty. The Prince, who is on terms of confidence with me, did not hesitate to mention that he was to have a pretty actress as his guest; how could he dream that the event would be of importance to the Emperor of Rhaetia? But had he known that the entertainment he meant to offer her might be interrupted, naturally he would, out of

consideration for the lady's feelings, have taken means to secure her against embarrassment."

"This night's work will give him cause to pick a private quarrel with me, if he chooses," said the Emperor, satisfied at least of the Chancellor's integrity.

"I do not think that he will choose, your Majesty. You are in a mood to be glad if he did, I fear. But, after all, I need *not* fear. You will always remember Rhaetia and put her interests before your own."

"You did not feel so confident of that a few hours ago, Chancellor."

"I was taken by surprise. But I knew well enough in my heart that when the test should come, your Majesty's cool head would prevail over the hot impulses of youth. See, we are passing through the village of Bünden, fast asleep already, every window dark. In another ten minutes we shall be at the lodge gates."

The Emperor laughed shortly and somewhat bitterly. "Add twice ten minutes to that, and we shall be out of the lodge gates again, with Chancellor von Markstein a sadder and a wiser man."

Meekness was once more the rôle for Iron Heart, and lifting his hands, palm upwards, in a gesture of generous indulgence, he denied himself the satisfaction of retort.

The hunting-lodge, now the property of the Chancellor's accommodating young friend, had until a year ago belonged to a Rhaetian semi-royal prince,

who had been forced by lack of sympathy among his creditors to sell. The present owner was a keen sportsman, and, though he came seldom, had spent a good deal of money upon much needed repairing of the quaint old house in the woods. It was years since the Emperor had visited the place, and the very outlines of the low rambling structure looked strange to him, as in the distance they were silhouetted against a spangled sky. He was glad of this; for he had spent some happy days here as a boy, and he wished to separate from the past the impressions which to-night must engrave upon his mind.

Two tall chimneys stood up like the erected ears of some alert, crouching animal; the path to the lodge gleamed white and straight in the darkness as a parting in the rough black hair of a giant; the trees of the forest gossipped together in the wind. It seemed to Maximilian now that they were evil things who told lies, slandering his love, and he hated them, and their rustling; he hated the two yellow eyes of the animal with pricked ears, which were only lighted windows; he hated the young Prince who had bought the right to bring scandal to this quiet place, and he would have hated the Chancellor, had not the old man limped as he stepped down from the carriage, showing how heavy was the burden of his years, as he had never shown it before.

The carriage was bidden to wait at a little distance from the lodge, and Maximilian, with Iron

Heart at his side, walked up the path that led to a hooded entrance. They ascended the two or three stone steps, and the Chancellor raised the mailed, clenched fist that did duty as a knocker. Twice he brought it down on the oak panel, and the sound of the metal ringing against wood went echoing away through the house, with an effect of emptiness and desolation.

Nobody came to answer the summons, and Maximilian smiled in the darkness. He did not believe even that the Prince was there; a practical joke had been played upon the Chancellor.

Again the mailed fist rang on oak. Only the echo replied. Von Markstein was alarmed. He thanked the night, which hid the tell-tale vein beating on his forehead from the keen eyes of the Emperor.

"I begin to think, von Markstein, that we might as well look for Miss de Courcy in a more likely, and, at the same time, more becoming place," he remarked, with a drawl meant to be aggravating. "There doesn't seem to be anyone here; even the caretaker is out courting, perhaps."

"But listen, your Majesty," said the Chancellor.

Maximilian did listen. Steps could be heard approaching the door inside the house—the sound of a heel on a floor of stone or marble.

CHAPTER XVI

THE OPENING OF A DOOR

It was a jäger who opened the door of the hunting-lodge and gazed at the two men standing in the shadow of the porch, apparently without recognition.

"We wish to see the Prince," said the Chancellor crisply, taking the initiative, as he knew that the Emperor would desire him to do.

"The Prince is not at home, sir," returned the jäger.

Maximilian's eyes lightened as he threw a glance of sarcastic meaning at his companion. But Iron Heart was undaunted. He knew very well now that this was only a prelude to the comedy, and though he had had a pang of anxiety at first, he thought that his young friend was playing the part allotted him with commendable realism. Naturally, when beautiful actresses came into the country unchaperoned, to dine with fascinating Princes, the least such favoured Royalties could do was to issue notices to an intrusive public that they were "not at home."

"You are mistaken," returned the Chancellor. "The Prince is at home, and he will receive us. It will be better for you to admit us without further parley."

Under the domination of the eyes which could quell a Reichstag, the jäger weakened, as doubtless his master had expected would happen in good time. "It may be that I have made a mistake, sir," he stammered, "though I do not think so. If you will have the kindness to walk in and wait until I can inquire whether the Prince has come home, or when he is likely to come home, I"—

"That is not necessary," said the Chancellor. "The Prince dines here with a lady this evening. We will go with you to the door of the dining-room, and follow your announcement of our presence."

But the jäger was no longer uncertain of his duty. The reaction had come, and he faced the invaders boldly. If his master had given instructions only to be overridden, at least the servant was sincere in his respect for them. He put himself in the doorway, and looked a barrier formidable to dislodge.

"That is impossible, sir!" he exclaimed. "I have my orders, which are that His Royal Highness is not at home to-night, and until I find out differently, nobody, not if it were the Emperor himself, should force himself in."

"You fool, those orders are not for us; and it is

the Emperor who will go in." With a step aside, the Chancellor let the light from a hanging lamp in the hall shine full upon Maximilian's face, hitherto masked in shadow.

His boast forgotten, the jäger uttered an exclamation of dismay, and, with a sudden failing of the knees, he left the doorway free.

"Your Majesty!" he faltered. "I did not see—I could not know! Most humbly I beg your Majesty's gracious pardon. If your Majesty will but hold me blameless with His Royal Highness"—

"Never mind yourself, and never mind His Royal Highness," broke in the Chancellor. "Open that door at the end of the hall, and announce the Emperor and Count von Markstein."

The unfortunate jäger, well-nigh in a state of collapse, obeyed. The door of the dining-room, which Maximilian knew of old, was flung wide, and a quavering voice made known to whom it might concern the arrival of "His Imperial Majesty the Emperor and the Herr Chancellor von Markstein."

The scene disclosed was as unreal, in Maximilian's eyes, as a painted picture: The walls of Pompeian red, the bronze candelabra, the polished floor, with rugs of creamy fur, and in the centre a flower-decked table glittering with lights, sparkling with silver; springing up from his chair a young man in evening dress, who faced the door; sitting motionless, her back half turned, a slender girl in satin of bridal

white, her uncovered shoulders gleaming with the soft sheen of pearl in the candle-light. This was the stage setting; these the characters discovered.

At sight of the girl Maximilian stopped on the threshold. All the blood in his body seemed rushing to his head, then surging back again upon his heart. The impossible had happened. His star had fallen from heaven, and the sky was dark.

CHAPTER XVII

THE THIRD COURSE

THE Prince came forward. "What a delightful surprise!" he exclaimed. "How good of you both to look me up! But I wish my prophetic soul had hinted to me that it would have been well to delay dinner. We have just reached the third course."

His eyes met the Chancellor's, then hid a twinkle under lashes that a professional beauty might have envied. "You must honour me by dining with us," he went on. "All will be ready in a moment, and I keep a man here whose *bisque d'écrevisse* is not half bad."

"Thanks," said Maximilian, "we cannot dine. Our visit is purely one of business, and a moment will see it finished. We owe you an explanation for intruding upon you in this manner." He paused; all his calculations were upset by von Markstein's triumph; deliberately to plan beforehand what he would do if he should find Miss de Courcy in this man's house would have been to insult her. He had

merely arranged a campaign in the event of the Chancellor's defeat. Now, the one course which appealed to him was frankness. He did not look at the girl, though he saw her, and her alone, with his eyes coldly fixed upon the Prince. He knew that she had risen, not in haste, as one who is detected and ashamed, but with a leasured and dainty dignity, as if concerned only to respect his rank. Her face was turned toward him now; he felt it—as a blind man may feel the rising of the sun—though still he would not look. No longer ago than last night at this hour they had been together in the garden at Schloss Lynarberg; he had held her in his arms; she had made him think she loved him. She had acted an agony of resentment because he had offered her his heart in his left hand. Now she was here with this butterfly who flitted through life in a rose-garden of pretty women. They had been laughing and talking before they were interrupted—these two at the dinner-table. The champagne glass beside her plate was half full. On the plate was fish, with a pink sauce; she had been enjoying her dinner in the Prince's company. Maximilian was not conscious that he had seen and noted all these trifling details which, together, proved her a soulless thing, light and worthless as a piece of thistle-down; yet each one was like a separate poisoned thorn that rankled in his flesh.

His pause, his search for the words of explana-

tion which he had volunteered, was really brief—scarcely so long as to count for a pause at all; yet he had aged in it. He felt that youth and the joy of life had fallen from him like a mantle, since he stepped across the threshold.

"I have spent some hours to-day," he said, "in looking for this lady. I was told that I should find her in your company. I came, and brought Count von Markstein, to prove to him that he was mistaken. Instead, *my* mistake has been proved to his satisfaction, since Miss de Courcy is here."

"Miss de Courcy is not here," broke in the girl, speaking for the first time. "I have reason to believe that she is in India."

"I would to Heaven that you were with her, or anywhere on earth but where you are!" cried the Emperor. He turned to the Prince. "You have my explanation," he said. "It remains only for Count von Markstein and me to bid you and this lady good-night."

The twinkle had died out of the Prince's eyes, and they sparkled with another light. The scene, though planned, had not been rehearsed; and the effect upon himself, now that it came to be acted, differed from his expectations. His quick temper, never too fast asleep to wake at the first call, sprang up under the look in Maximilian's eyes.

"You'll not bid her good-night in that manner, if you please," he angrily began, when the girl, catch-

ing his arm, cut him short. The familiar way in which she touched the gay young Apollo, resting against his shoulder, sent a red-hot dart of pain through Maximilian's nerves, and he scorned himself for it, because his love ought already to have been uprooted, like a noxious weed.

"Wait, wait!" she cried. "This is my affair, please. You see, the difficulty is that the Emperor doesn't know who I am, and"—

"It is time I told him!" exclaimed the Prince.

"Let the Chancellor do that," said she. "I can see he is dying to. And as he has taken a great deal of trouble, he deserves some reward."

"I have already informed His Imperial Majesty that he would find with the Prince Miss Minnie Brand, an English actress"—the old man bowed, sneering—"justly famous for her talents."

"And His Majesty. What does he say?" The girl's voice sounded anxious now, even wistful. She still stood beside the Prince, but her eyes so appealed to Maximilian's that he could not withhold them, granting her at last a cold and fixed regard.

"I say nothing," he answered. "You have left me nothing to say. You are the Prince's friend. You do not need anything that I can give."

"Yet last night," she cried, "you said you loved me."

"Is this the place to remind me of that?" he demanded fiercely.

"Yes ; because I came here hoping that you would follow. I *do* care for the Prince ; I should be very ungrateful if I didn't ; but I care far more for *you*."

The boldness of the announcement, its astounding impertinence, coming as it did, when and where it did, was like a smart box upon the ear, literally staggering Maximilian. Sparks danced before his eyes. He opened his lips to answer her with deadly bitterness, but did not speak. With one look, that pent up all the passion of outraged love, and a fury of disappointment that was and must ever be unutterable, he turned upon his heel.

"You would go and leave me here?" exclaimed the girl.

He wheeled round in the doorway. "I am not sure how to address you," he said, "since you no longer claim the name by which I have thought of you, nor do I seem any longer to know you. But if there be the slightest doubt in your mind as to your desire to stay here, I—Count von Markstein and I—would gladly place our carriage at your service."

She ran to him, holding out both hands, like a child who asks indulgence. "If I can explain," she said, with quickening breath, her eyes shining, star-like, "if I tell you that it is quite, quite a mistake, that there was no thought of harm in my coming to this house, that I am true to all you thought me, to all I *hope* you thought me, will you believe my word?"

Maximilian looked her in the eyes and straightway forgot that he and she were not alone. And the Chancellor saw that he forgot, and wished much to remind him of many things connected with his own presence. But even he dared not speak at that instant, and had to listen, biting his lip with a well-preserved tooth.

"Believe your word!" the Emperor echoed slowly. He would have said, "Why should I believe it, when it is enough that I believe my eyes?" But he was gazing into hers, and so he could not say it. No other woman's eyes had ever before had power to play tricks with his will, therefore he was the more ready to fall under the spell of hers. "I must believe it!" he pronounced. "It is death to doubt you. Tell me you are all I thought you, show me how it can be so, and I will believe in spite of everything."

"Your Majesty!" groaned the Chancellor. But His Majesty did not hear. It was the Prince who drowned the warning.

"Oh, come!" he exclaimed, "this is going farther than I bargained for. I can't stand all this talk about 'doubting' and 'proving.' The whole thing"—

"Is for me to explain, not you," broke in Sylvia. "It is my right. I will not have it taken from me. Maximilian, last night you said that you cared for me, or—this would never have happened. A few moments ago you asked if the Prince's hunting-lodge were a fit place for me to remind you of that, and I

answered 'yes.' It was not time to tell you why, then, but it is time now. I said that this was the proper place, because it is my brother's house, and if we are ever to be anything to one another, it is fitting that my brother should put my hand in yours."

"At last, then, I can introduce my sister, Princess Sylvia of Eltzburg-Neuwald," ejaculated the Crown Prince of Abruzzia, with a sigh of overwhelming relief.

For a moment nobody spoke. The room seemed to ring with Friedrich's words, with the name which, till now, had held so little music for Maximilian's ears. He heard it and was speechless, even as the Chancellor was speechless. He looked at Friedrich, as if he would have spoken; he looked at Sylvia, and forgot to speak. She held out her hands once more, and with an impulse which he did not strive to control, he went down upon one knee as he caught and kissed them.

Long ago she had vowed that he should bend the knee to her, if he were to win her; but now that the prophecy proved true, she bade him rise as he whispered the one word "Forgive!"

"Oh, it is I who must be forgiven!" she said, with tears instead of triumph in her voice. "You don't half understand yet."

Friedrich and Count von Markstein stole from the room and were not missed. Their parts were played.

"I want no explanation," Maximilian answered. "I want only you."

"I won't try to tell you how it all began—not now. But my ears tingle still with some words which my actions gave you the right to speak," she urged. "Last night I wanted to go into a convent, and, above all things, I wished to get away from Rhaetia. We were forced to wait, because of Miss M'Pherson's illness. When Count von Markstein called, we excused ourselves. But when Fritz's card came up, it was different. We couldn't guess whether or not he really knew who we were. His face of surprise showed us he *didn't*. At first he was going to be secretive; but Fritz isn't good at fibs, unless he's had time to prepare them; and a plot he'd just been concocting with the Chancellor all came out. The truth was, he'd taken me for an actress with whom I'm afraid he'd been flirting in Abruzzia. It seems he'd informed her that there might one day—be something between his sister and the Emperor of Rhaetia; she knew, too, that the real de Courcys were Fritz's cousins, for she'd met them when acting in Calcutta. Altogether, for these and other reasons, he fancied I might be Miss Brand, seeking revenge for a slight by humiliating his sister. Imagine how he felt when he saw *me*! And here's the point where Count von Markstein turned into my guardian angel, instead of driving me from Eden with a flaming sword. He'd told Fritz that you were searching for

Mary de Courcy to—*ask her to be the Empress*. At this, from being the most miserable, I became the happiest girl on earth. I forgave Fritz, he forgave me, and—I at last induced him to let the plot be carried out to the end. I hadn't doubted what that end would be till you came into this room and I saw the look in your eyes. It was like a dagger of ice in my heart. Tell me you forgive me for everything. Tell me that, if I'd been different, and content with conventionalities, you would not have loved me more."

He took her in his arms, and held her as if he would never let her go. "If you had been different, I would not have loved you at all," he said. "Yet if things had been different, I could not have helped but love you, just the same. I should have been bound to fall in love with Princess Sylvia of Eltzburg-Neuwald at first sight, as I fell in love with Mary de Courcy."

"Ah, but at best you would have fallen in love with Sylvia because it was your duty. And you fell in love with Mary because it was your duty not to. Which makes it so much better."

"It was no question of duty, but of fate," the Emperor persisted. "The stars ordained that I should love you."

"Then I wish"—and Sylvia laughed happily, as she could afford to laugh now—"that the stars had told me last summer. It would have saved me a great deal of trouble. And yet I don't know," she

added more slowly. "It has been a wonderful adventure. We shall think of it when we are old."

"We shall never be old, for we love each other," said the Emperor.

THE END.



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